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BUFFALO BILL'S FIRST TRAIL,


OR

WILL CODY

THE

PONY EXPRESS RIDER

BY
NED BUNTLINE

A detailed black and white illustration of a man, presumably Will Cody, riding a horse at a gallop. The rider is wearing a wide-brimmed hat, a long coat, and chaps, and is looking back over his shoulder. The horse is depicted in a dynamic, running pose with its mane and tail flowing. The background consists of simple, horizontal lines suggesting a landscape or motion.

Buffalo Bill's First Trail;

OR,

Will Cody, the Pony Express Rider.

BY NED BUNTLINE,

AUTHOR OF "FIRE FEATHER," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A VILLAINOUS TRIO.

"Git, Satan, git! Yeou, Susy Ann! Mehitable Jane, travel! Kadobble along, ye lazy glut-tions—ye onsart'in old kickers! Git, I say!"

And while he yelled, a lash, full ten feet long, attached to a short handle cracked sharp as a rifle-shot over the backs of a drove of fifteen or twenty mules—pack and saddle animals, that were being driven along the old freight and stage trail which led over the "Great Rockies" toward the Pacific coast.

"Satan" was the bell-mule in the lead.

That the driver, known along the line as Old Jake Limbertoes, was a "character," could be taken in at a glance.

Tall, raw-boned, angular in build and feature, his large gray eyes wore a droll expression—kindly at most times, though almost flashing fire when his temper was up. "Dander," he called it.

An old army overcoat covered the upper part of his body. He had cut half of the length of the skirt off, so as to be out of his way in riding. His hat had once been a fashionable beaver—high and bell-crowned, with a narrow rim. But it bore the marks of years of rough usage. Huge cavalry boots, coming above his knees, with his trowserloons, as he called them, tucked inside, almost met the coat. On his right heel he wore a brass army spur, and his sparse hair, turned partly gray, hung scattering down to the cape of his overcoat.

In a belt around his waist he wore two large horse-pistols, army pattern of that day, and across his saddle in front of him lay a long, old-fashioned Queen Anne musket, that would carry almost a two-ounce ball, or a whole handful of buckshot.

By the side of this strange old man, on a pretty, mouse-colored Indian pony, rode as lovely a girl as ever mortal eye admired. Young, not over fifteen or sixteen years, *petite* in form, she was yet so fully-developed that she could well be called a child-woman. Eyes of dark-blue, hair of sunlit gold hanging in natural curls over her neck and shoulders, features very fine and expressive, delicate hands and feet—she looked like a lady, born and bred.

Yet she called that great, ungainly old man *father*! There was no more resemblance between them than there would be between a cabbage and a rosebud.

She was clothed neatly and plainly in a well-fitting dress of blue flannel, wore nice gaiter boots, and a jaunty cap with a long ostrich-plume of jetty hue falling back over her light curls, to heighten the contrast.

Beside her pony trotted a demure-looking little white mule, on which was packed her immediate baggage in two great wicker-baskets covered with oil-cloth.

Packed on mules in the drove were two tents, cooking utensils and provisions. Also a stock of calico, vermilion and beads, blankets, and powder, and lead, for Jake Limbertoes trafficked with friendly Indians when he met them, and as a mule and horse trader never lost a chance.

They were passing through a little grove of cottonwoods and willows close to the swift-running stream known as the "Sweetwater," and the sun was not more than two hours high—perhaps less. Grass was plentiful just there, and the young girl, weary from a long ride, looked over the scene with a longing gaze.

"What a pretty spot for a camp, father!" she said. "Wood, water and grass all at hand."

"Yes, Libbie—it is jist as nice as punkin-pie. But 'twon't dew for us to stop here. 'Tain't more'n tew or three mile to the stage an' pony station and there's lots o' men around there to help a feller-creeter if he gits inter trouble."

"Trouble? Do you expect trouble, father?"

"I don't exactly *expect* it, Libbie—but human natur' is as onsart'in as a mule's heels. You know I didn't like that *Britisher* that was a nosin' around our last camp, nor the half-nigger, half-Injun he calls his guide. The *Britisher* asked a thunderin' sight more questions than he got answers to. And though he tried to be as perlit as peeled apples to *you*, his British nose was turned up as if he smelt somethin' sour all the time he hung around camp."

"Then, to-day he passed us with a feller in his company that I've seen in Omaha—a regular gambler—not half as good as a decent thief. And they looked wiked enough to do any mean trick when they went by. I'm not goin' to camp out o' sight o' help while they're on this trail, if I can help it!"

"I don't believe they've gone beyond the next station. The men got their mont's wages last week and that gambler knows it."

So the mule-train moved on and left the pretty camping-place behind.

About three miles further on they came in sight of a group of buildings, the post-house, stables and corrals of the stage and pony express station. The United States flag flew from a staff in front of the largest building indicating the presence of a few of Uncle Sam's Boys in Blue, probably a sergeant's guard left to protect the station from predatory bands of Sioux which often swooped down on defenseless posts carrying off horses and sometimes scalps, also.

When the train we have described was within a half-mile of the station, the clatter of bounding hoofs was heard in their rear and the girl, turning in her saddle to look back, cried out:

"It is the Pony Express and that same rider, handsome Will Cody, is on again. He is making two stations to-day."

"So he is—he is as smart as chain-lightnin' an' true as steel, I've heerd tell by them that knows him."

By this time the rider was up to them—a handsome lad of eighteen, tall for his age, splendidly formed, and riding as if he and his little pony were one.

"Old man—I stop at the next station—go in to camp near by, for I've news for you!" he said, bowing low to Libbie, lifting his hat from over the mass of brown curls that floated out on his shoulders as he galloped along.

The girl blushed, but it was with pleasure. For even a little attention from that handsome rider was a change in the monotony of her life.

When they reached the station the other rider had sped forward on a fresh pony with the Express mail, but young Cody, destined in time to become famous and foremost as Buffalo Bill, was there waiting to welcome them.

"Put your stock all in the Government corral—I've arranged it, old man—feed'll not cost you anything!" said Bill to the old Yankee, before the latter had time to dismount. "I'll help you make camp. Don't say a word—do as I tell you. There's a game up to beat you, but it'll fail as sure as smoke, for I've lit onto it just in time!"

Libbie heard these words, and in a low tone said:

"Father—do just as Will tells you. I knew he doubled his ride to-day for good cause!"

"Bet yer life I did, Rosebud. There's them in pistol range that don't mean any good to you or your dad, an' that's why I'm here. That cussed half-breed yonder licked his squaw fearful, this morning—she's Pawnee, and she up an' told me what the feller that hires him is up to. When the camp is made and I can talk to you an' your dad alone, I'll let you both see the hand they mean to play!"

While he talked, Bill helped Libbie off her pony, and then the mules were unpacked and Bill drove them all into the station corral and told a stableman to give them fodder.

Then he came back and helped Old Jake put up his two tents side by side, and placed his baggage inside.

While this was being done, a middle-aged man, with brown hair and mutton-chop whiskers, sauntered around, followed by a vicious-looking half-breed Indian. The white man was dressed in English velvet—corduroy they call it out West—with spurs on his high boots, an English jockey-cap on his head, and a loaded riding-whip in his hand.

The gambler who came there with him, a desperado of the worst class, was already up in a game of poker with a stage-driver inside the sitting and waiting room of the station, with a bottle of whisky, for encouragement, between them.

As soon as the two tents were up and the traps and baggage of Old Jake and his daughter put inside, young Cody got the chance to say what he wanted to those whom he was assisting.

"That squaw told me," he said, "that the Englishman has planned to run off that girl o' yours and make her his wife. And he has hired her man, the cussed half-breed, and the gambler, to help him. And the squaw was too mad to lie. It seems the English galoot has knowledge of a fortune comin' to the girl. If so, *you'd* ought to know it!"

"Lad, you're *kind*—jest too kind to be human!" said Old Jake. "You've ridden an extra route to-day, just to put me on my guard!"

"You've hit it dead center, first shot!" said young Cody. "That's what I'm here for. An' what's more, I'm here to help spoil their little game. If they try it on, you can count me in and there'll be somebody hurt, you bet. But, if you're not unwillin', I'd like to know one thing for sure. The old squaw said she'd heard the Englishman tell her man and the gambler that Miss Libbie there wasn't your child! Now is she?"

"I wouldn't answer that question to every one that asked it," said Old Jake, coloring up. "She has never seen or known any other father—have you, gal?"

"No, father. And a better, kinder father than you never lived!"

"Yet for all that, Libbie, you and Will Cody only knowin' it for sure—you are only my daughter by adoption. Fifteen year ago, come September—your mother dying, gave you into my care. She was an American, who'd married a *Britisher*—a rich one, too, who'd took her for

her beauty. A year after—the *darned skunk*, beggin' your pardon, Libbie, for callin' him so, left her and went back to England. And she—she died broken-hearted in less than a year, poor, poor woman."

Tears coursed down the old man's cheeks while he spoke.

"She turned you over to me, Libbie, gal, and I've been father and mother to you ever since, so far as I've known how!"

"I want no father but you—you who have been all tenderness and love to me ever since I can remember!" said the lovely girl, as she placed her arm about his neck.

"I've got all your history and your mother's marriage-certificate, and the proof of your birth and the name of him who went away, secure in a bank vault down East—I've kept 'em for your sake, child, thinkin' they'd come good some day. So now you know my secret—that is a great part of it! A little over a year ago, I saw in a paper a story about a great English lord, being one of the richest men on the face o' the earth, and the name was the same as is on that marriage-certificate. And I made up my mind just as soon as I could get eight or ten thousand dollars ahead, I'd go over the big herrin'-pond with you, gal, an' all the docyments, and see if you don't have somethin' worth while a-comin' to you in the shape of name an' fortune! That's why I'm here working over to the gold regions to make somethin'!"

"I wish no father but you, no better fortune than I have! If I had millions I would not leave you!" said the girl, still caressing the rough face of the old man with her soft hand.

"Gal—you're a lady born. Anybody that has eyes can see it. And I've done my best to treat you like one. Though I've not much education—you've had the best I could get for you with my means. But now I've said enough to answer Master Will Cody's question and he'll keep our secret!"

"You bet I will. And I'll help to drive these scoundrels off your track. We'll watch over you to-night—me and some o' the station boys, and if they don't take the back trail to-morrow, we'll know the reason why!"

While this conversation had been going on inside the tent, in a low tone, the Englishman had crept up close in the rear of the canvas and crouched with a listening ear as near as he could get.

He moved stealthily and noiselessly off when Cody rose to go out, and when Old Jake and the boy appeared he was near the stream looking into the water as if to see whether it abounded in fish. They could not see his face, flushed with an exultant glow.

"I am on the right trace!" he said to himself. "I thought I was before—now I am sure, and I can act. Her hand and fortune *shall* be mine!" And striding toward the station he went in and watched the game his hired desperado was playing.

The gambler was losing money and the old stage-driver was quite exultant. Old as he was in border life and as good with the reins as the best, he had not learned yet that to prepare a man to lose easily all he has got, there is no better way than to craze him with a little good luck, judiciously permitted, though the professional can play to win whenever he thinks it best.

The gambler was a *sharp* of the first class—known widely as Faro Ben, and never was beat without his own connivance.

There was considerable cash among the riders, station men and drivers, and he wanted to make a big haul after he had got them into the belief that he played a square game and *luck* would come out first best.

The Englishman got the eye of Faro Ben as soon as he could after entering the room, and by a sign indicated a desire for conference.

The latter, saying he had "no luck," threw up his hand, and leaving the bottle and cards to others, sauntered out in the open air following his confederate or employer.

It had come on dark, no moon, and fleecy clouds moving with a brisk, chill wind from over the mountains nearly obscured the stars.

But in front of the two tents that belonged to Old Jake a bright little camp-fire was glowing and near it stood young Cody the Express Rider and Old Jake, while around it, flitting to and fro like a fairy was pretty Libbie engaged in cooking supper for the three, as Cody had promised to share the evening meal.

The appetizing odor of coffee, broiled antelope and a pan of fish fresh from the Sweetwater reached the nostrils of the two conspirators who moved off toward an open shed out of ear-shot of the station to talk over their plans.

Unnoticed by them, as noiseless as a cat creeping toward its intended prey, a third party followed them, stooping till his form was almost level with the ground.

This was the renegade Indian or half-breed who had been employed as a guide over the plains—a thieving, murderous wretch, so much distrusted by his own race as to be outlawed.

CHAPTER II.

DRAW-POKER.

"WHAT'S up, Mr. Lercher? What in thunder did you want to call me off my game for

when I was just ready to turn luck on that fool and pull his pile. I had to slip three aces from my sleeve when I hauled out on your signal!"

"I didn't engage you to gamble for yourself or me, either!" said the Englishman, petulantly. "I've a bigger game than cards before us. I've found out *that* to-night which, while it puts us more on our guard, will force us to go to work at once. Listen!"

"Well, spit it out! Talk is cheap!" snapped the gambler.

"In the first place, I have discovered to a surety that this is the girl I want. I've been tracing her for some time, and at last she is found—found, never to be lost sight of. Understand that!"

"She's the real heiress, then?"

"Yes—and I know pretty near where all the papers are to prove it!"

"Good—go in and win!"

"That is easy to say—the next thing is to do it! We are in more peril than you dream of. That cursed half-breed—if I didn't need him for a guide, I'd send him off—got us into a muddle when he thrashed his squaw. It seems that she had overheard us talking about the girl, and in her anger she exposed our whole plan to get hold of the girl to that young Pony Express Rider, who is over at their camp now. He rode a second route to come on and warn them of danger. I heard him tell the whole story, and heard a good deal more than I can speak of just now. They mean, with what help they can get, to force us to go back!"

"On what pretense can they try it?"

"That we mean harm to the old man and the girl he falsely calls his daughter!"

"They can't prove it!"

"It's not likely they'll try it. If the boy rider and the old man calls for help here, they'll get it, and if we show fight, they'll outnumber us, five to one, and we'll get the worst of it!"

"It looks that way! But when I get my work in, some of them will be taken right sick—bet your bottom dollar there!"

"True—but the odds are against us!"

"Ah—you mean to cave—to give up the game—to wilt right down after spending so much time and money? I didn't think you so weak in the knees as that!"

"Neither am I. But a little strategy may save us bloodshed, and help us to carry our point with but little trouble!"

"What kind of strategy?"

"To apparently take the back track—retreat a little way, then strike some other route and get ahead of the old man and his outfit. Then, when they have no friends or protectors, we can make quick work of him and take the girl in!"

"You'll find it hard to throw the trail!" muttered the gambler. "This Pony Express is in the way. The riders all know each other and pass the word along the line from one to the other almost as easy as one could send a telegraph message where the wires are up! If we go back they'll know where we leave the line and the word will be sent on. That Cody boy is in love with the girl, I'll bet, and he'll keep a lookout for her safety."

"Then form some plan yourself. Let me see if you can better mine."

"Buy them all off. If the girl is so great an heiress, what is money to you if you only get her? You have enough of it with you—buy the Yankee and boy off."

"I can try it, but I don't believe it will work. The young fellow is as proud as Lucifer and I think the old chap loves the girl more than he does money!"

"Well, if that fails, we have one other chance. We can light out, leave the traveled trail and hunt up some of the Indian bands, and hire a gang of them to help us. Bear-Claw, your guide, speaks every dialect on the plains, and you can get men enough if you can pay enough to do all you want to."

"Yes, we might. But I don't like to trust the red rascal. He is full of treachery. He'd kill us both for what he'd get, if he could do it safely."

Little did they dream that the man they spoke of heard every word and laid his hand on his knife with a horrible grimace when they spoke of what he might do.

"Well—let us go back to the station and get supper. After that I'll see if I can get into something like a friendly talk with the old man first and the young Express Rider afterward. Possibly I can make a bargain."

The two men now returned to the station and called for supper.

They were followed by the half-breed, who shook his clinched hand as he looked at their retreating forms.

"Injun good enough show 'em trail—all same as dog rest of time!" he muttered. "Maybe they get sick afore some time. Me be doctor then!"

And again his too ready hand rested on the hilt of his big knife.

Then he lounged into the kitchen and got his supper in a corner.

After Old Jake, Will Cody and pretty Libbie had eaten supper in the tent of the old man, Will took a seat and had a long and pleasant talk with the intelligent girl about life in the

East, her long journey, and his own active and dangerous life as an Express Rider.

Meantime Old Jake went over to the station to see the agent and see if he wanted any mules, leaving the young people together.

Entering the main sitting-room he saw Faro Ben whom he knew well by sight, sitting down with his former opponent the stage-driver to a new game of "draw-poker."

The Englishman stood near and seemed desirous to draw the old man into conversation, for he said:

"Good-evening, friend! I was looking at your mules to-day when I passed. They're a mighty fine lot!"

"I reckon you had eyes on more than my mules! But it's tarnation little good 'twill do ye!" said the old man, abruptly.

"You needn't get mulish yourself, old man, because I try to be civil!"

"Git out! The p'ison sarpint was civil to Eve in the Garding of Eden, but he meant to cheat her out of her soul for all that. You mind your business and I'll mind mine! If you can't take a hint, you may git help!"

"I supposed you had mules to sell and thought of buying!" said the Englishman, determined to preserve his temper.

"Fudge! A British donkey don't want American mules! They'd kick out what little brains you brought over!"

"Ha! ha! You're full of fun. I like to see an old man lively!"

"You'll be apt to feel livelier than I be, if I find you follerin' up my trail to-morrow. I know you from A to izzard, and I'm afeard I'll break the last will and advice o' my gran'dad if you pester me much more!"

"May I ask what that advice was?"

"Yes, and git an answer that jest suits your case. He told me never to shoot game that weren't worth picking up. And skunk fur is no account anyway!"

These words brought a laugh from nearly every man in the room, and Mr. Lercher had sense enough to see that the laugh was on him. He tried to laugh himself, but it was an effort and poorly carried out.

"I thought you Yankees liked to make money!" he said, at last.

"So we do, in honest trade or barter. But we never skin flints for the hide an' tallow, or draw for molasses out of a vinegar-cask!"

"Nor make nutmegs out of basswood, I suppose!"

"Not without some 'tarnal fool of a Britisher comes along green enough for pickles!"

Again the laugh was on the Englishman, and he gave up the game.

He sat down sullenly and watched his confederate's game of cards.

So did Jake Limbertoes, when he saw Faro Ben adroitly slip three cards up his sleeve, though no one else in the room had observed it.

One or two hands more were played and the stage-driver won on them.

Then Old Jake saw another card slide up the gambler's left-hand sleeve, and he knew a crisis was at hand.

The gambler had the deal. The old stage-driver's eyes flashed. He evidently had a very good hand to bet on.

The four cards slid down from the left-hand sleeve and four others as adroitly slipped up the right-hand sleeve of the gambler.

The pot was ten dollars, and the old stage-driver looked at his hand and doubled the pot on it.

The gambler doubled that again and laughed. That made the old driver a little mad, and he doubled up again with the remark that he'd "go all he had and could borrow on his hand!"

"Pile it up!" said Faro Ben, coolly. "I'll see your pile and call you!"

"Not with them four aces you just shook out of your sleeve, you 'tarnal thief. The cards he drew are up his right-hand sleeve—I saw the trick!" cried Old Jake, and before the gambler could move, the brave old fellow seized the right arm and held up four worthless cards—a Jack, deuce and two four-spots.

The stage-driver, who held four kings and a queen, grabbed the gambler's other hand, and found the four aces just slipped.

With one grab he pocketed every dollar on the board and drew a huge old navy revolver with the other.

The gambler would have drawn and fought too, but he saw a half-dozen stage and station-men "pull" and he knew it was best to keep his hands down.

"'Twas only a joke!" he muttered. "I didn't intend to take his money. I only wanted to show him how such things could be done!"

"Waal, stranger, I've learned the lesson and kind o' like it!" said the old driver, coolly, pushing his hands full of gold, silver and bills deeper down in his pockets.

Turning to Jake he said:

"Old man, words aren't much! But your eyes shall have some *salve* that'll do 'em good afore you pull out o' here! I'll hold on to it till this bold gambolier leaves the station, an' I reckon the sooner he does leave the better 'twill be for his hide!"

Too many angry eyes gleamed on the gambler

for him to doubt the wisdom of the last assertion. He saw too from the pallid face and trembling form of his confederate and employer that he could expect no help there.

The station men and stage-line employees had discovered a bare-faced attempt to cheat one of their comrades out of his hard-earned wages, and there was a volcanic fire on the point of eruption.

"Git!" shouted the old driver, and his pistol covered the gambler.

"Git!" cried Old Jake Limbertoes, and his brawny fist was doubled up within a foot of the Englishman's face.

"Git!" cried a brawny stableman, and he lifted the half-breed guide twice his length over the floor as he sidled in to see what was the matter.

And the trio made a sudden exit from the station-house.

Their animals had been staked out to grass and fodder a couple of hundred yards away, under a big cottonwood near the banks of the stream. The three saddle-horses and a pack-mule stood near a little fire which the half-breed had built, where they expected to sleep, at the base of the tree.

Not one of them spoke until they had reached that little fire.

Then, prefacing his words with a fearful oath, Faro Ben hissed out:

"I'll be the death of every man in that cursed crowd!"

"They'll be the death of us, if we don't get away from here!" growled Mr. Lercher.

"Me have one scalp, yet!" said the guide, bitterly. "White man kick hard as mule!"

"Cowards! If either of you had shown fight, I'd have cleared the shanty!" cried the gambler, boiling over with wrath now he was out from under the "drop" of a dozen pistols.

"Me no coward! You go kill one man, me kill two!" cried the Indian, angrily.

"We can do better. We can get out of range with the horses and mule to a new spot—then you come back and fire every building here, and stampede the stock so they can't follow us, and I'll give you a thousand dollars—cash down!" cried the gambler, addressing the Indian.

"You not got a cent—old driver got all your money!"

"He'll stake me—he has plenty!" cried the gambler, pointing to the Englishman.

"Not much! It would spoil my whole plan. We must get away from here quietly and with whole skins if we can. If you hadn't gone to gambling and cheating, we would not have had any trouble with these men. Now they are our deadly enemies!"

"They'll be deadlier before I am done with them. If you fellows have no grit, I have! I'll show you what one man can do when the devil is in him!"

The gambler drew a revolver in one hand and a knife in the other, and turned to go toward the station.

"Hold on, there! Stand where you are! Move hand or foot, either one of you three, and you'll get a half-ounce o' lead, as a present from one who never misses his game!"

The voice came out sharp and clear as a bugle note.

"Will Cody!" cried the gambler, peering out in the darkness which his eyes could not penetrate, but he knew the voice.

"Yes—it is Will Cody, who has heard every threat you've made. I'd do right to shoot you where you stand, and I will if you offer to move till I tell you!"

The men knew he had the drop on them, for they stood in the firelight, and he was covered by the darkness.

"What do you want us to do?" asked the Englishman, shaking like a leaf.

"First—Bear-Claw, put some more wood on that fire. It lays at your feet—be quick and keep up that blaze, or I'll blaze you!"

The Indian obeyed the order.

"Now saddle up and get ready to leave. You'll take the back trail for the States, and if you're in ten miles of here when day breaks there'll be them who'll follow you that far, and they'll riddle your hides if they see you!"

The men knew their peril too well to dispute the command. They knew a yell or a shot from the young Express Rider would bring the whole force at the station down on them.

Their horses were near, in the full light of the blazing fire. To saddle up, pack their mule and mount took but a very few minutes.

"Head for the back trail, Bear-Claw—you know it by night as well as day. Go—and after this keep out of my way, every mother's son of you!"

Led by the Indian, the little train headed in the right direction.

When out beyond the circle of light, the gambler cried out:

"The game is on your side to-night, Will Cody, but there'll be a turn by and by, and then you look out!"

"Barking dogs don't bite!" was all the answer the young man condescended to make.

He waited until not a sound of their horses' feet could be heard—then he returned to the station.

CHAPTER III.

LATE REPENTANCE.

ON his death-bed—in the last throes of agony, a man was stretched—one who had held his head as high as the proudest of the peers of a great empire—a lord among lords, whose vast estates and almost regal income made him the envied and the courted recipient of flattering homage and subserviency. Though a peer of the realm, one of its wealthiest, he now knew he was but a man—from the dust, and about to return to it.

Three of the greatest physicians in all England stood by his bedside in a final consultation. Except them, there were but two persons in the room.

One—a gray-haired old servant who had never left him since his childhood, wept silently as he stood near the foot of the canopied couch.

The other a young man—not over thirty, if so much, whose tall form, intellectual face and dignified manner, now saddened by grief, would proclaim his gentle birth and breeding wherever he was met.

And this was Lord Glenarvon's secretary and confidential agent, Neville Normand.

"Gentlemen," said the dying peer to the physicians, "I read in your faces that you believe me near my end!"

"We are doing all we can for you, my lord!"

"And all you can do will not avert what I feel is coming—the chill of death is at my heart. It is well—I would not quarrel with my fate. He who life gave, can take life away. In your presence I announce that my last will and testament is made, signed, duly witnessed and in my lawyer's hands. There stands my best friend and executor—Neville Normand, the son of my old-time friend, Normand of Eaglethorpe. Bear witness if need be to what I have said, and now leave me. I will die in peace!"

He closed his eyes as if in weariness. His breathing grew faint and short, and they did not move for they thought he was "going off."

But suddenly a shudder passed through his frame—a nervous start.

"I saw her—my little daughter!" he murmured. "And the wife whom I left in anger, so long—so long ago!"

The physicians looked from one to the other in amazement. They supposed, all who knew him supposed, he was unmarried—had never taken wife to share his fortunes.

Yet there were two in that room who knew all—the old valet—the young secretary.

"His mind wanders! He does not know what he is saying!" gently suggested the oldest physician, not thinking his low whisper would be overheard.

"It is false! My mind is as clear as a cloudless sky!" cried the peer, rising partially on his pillow. "Sixteen—yes, seventeen years ago, I married an angelic woman whom I left in a foreign land in a fit of anger because she bore me a daughter and not a son! I—the last of my race with whom my title dies, had not the manhood to wait, nor the courage to go back or call her to me. She is dead—but my child lives—I would have gone to her—but—ah, the pain—the pain! It is so—so dark!"

Gasping, he fell back—a quiver—then all was over!

The old servant crept to the foot of the bed and tears rolled in torrents from his eyes while he sobbed out:

"The best master in all the world is gone!"

The young secretary wept in silent agony—for he had lost a life-long friend.

The oldest physician reverently closed the dim eyes, while another crossed the thin, white hands upon the still breast.

"Our work is done—he suffers no more!" said the youngest of the three, though an old man.

"Gentlemen—I can bear witness that skill, science and enduring patience on your parts have been exerted to the last!" said the young secretary. "I have but one request to make now. It is that you who heard his last words, be present at the opening of his will. It will be read at noon, in the library of the castle, on the day after his funeral!"

"We will be there!" was the response from each physician as they left the room to bear forth the sad news.

A few minutes later the tolling bell from the chapel near at hand told a sorrowing host of faithful servants that a master whom they loved had passed to the spirit-land.

"We are cowards—the veriest cowards that ever squealed!" bitterly cried out the gambler, Faro Ben, when he and his two companions had ridden on in silence for a mile or more. "Three well-armed men to turn tail before a boy, not yet eighteen years old! I've a mind to turn back and die in my tracks or have my revenge!"

"Do—if you want to. I've too much to live for, to care to die just yet!" said Lercher, calm now he was out from under that dangerous "drop."

"Yet you are going back—giving up your game!"

"Not by a long sight, my fiery friend. I am only backing out of present danger. I do not intend to give up a game that is almost in my hands. To-night, by accident, I got positive

knowledge of a fact I was not quite certain of. Now I know where the heiress I sought is, and I shall never be far away from her till I hold her as my own. I may be foiled for a time—but, mark me, I will succeed in the end or die."

The trio had by this time nearly reached the little grove on the road which almost overhung the river, where Libbie had asked Old Jake to camp that evening when they neared the station.

The Indian was slightly in advance and had just entered the edge of the overshadowing timber, when the sharp click of guns made ready for use reached his keen ear, and a stern voice cried out:

"Halt! Move a step and you die!"

CHAPTER IV.

A FORTUNE.

"HOLD your fire! We've pulled up! But I say, pard, isn't that Omaha Charley's voice?" cried Faro Ben.

"Tisn't nothin' shorter! Who're you? Seems like I'd heard your yap afore."

"It's Faro Ben, pard, and me an' my friend was jest a-prayin' to meet suthin' like you on the road!"

"Flush, eh, and want to unload?"

"Not much—but we're in a game where you can help us an' make big pay a-doin' of it!"

"No foolin', Ben! You've got six triggers set right onto yer carkisses!"

"I'm not a-foolin', pard! If you're camped near by, take us thar and listen to our music. If I play a false note, riddle me on the spot!"

"I'll do it, Ben—bet yer sweet life, if yer tongue runs loose. But we'll try you. Pards, show 'em a glim and light 'em to camp."

A slide from the face of a "bull's-eye" lantern flew back, almost blinding the trio as it flashed full in their faces. Then, turned the other way, it revealed six armed and desperate-looking men, headed by a seventh, whose smooth face had a dangerously quiet look.

His thin lips, keen gray eyes, a habitual sneer on his sharp, thin face, upheld the character of Omaha Charley as one of the "hardest" men on the plains.

"Lead the way to camp, Bill Slicer—these galoots are safe as long as I say so!" was Charley's remark.

His men filed off to the left through the timber, led by the gleam of the reflecting lamp, and Faro Ben with his companions followed.

"Ten such men as them and we are makes quite an army!" said Lercher, in a low tone, to Faro Ben.

"Do you count yourself among the we's, you sneakin' coward?" growled Ben. "If I did right I'd turn you over to these road-agents and let them skin you clean and cut your throat for luck! I've had no luck since I've been with you!"

"But you will have! Don't kill the goose that will lay golden eggs for you!"

"Keep quiet then and don't bother me. I want to do some thinking."

The party moved back a quarter of a mile or thereabout into a thicket of scrubby pine so dense that they did not see a camp-fire until they were fairly upon it.

Here in a little glade of grass, by a spring of running water, the horses of the road-agents were picketed—all saddled and ready for instant use.

"Throw some pine-knots on the fire and light up. I'll have a look at Faro Ben's crowd!" cried Omaha Charley to one of his men.

When the blaze flashed up, making the whole scene as bright as day, the bandit glanced over the three who had just dismounted.

"So—you've got that old cut-throat Bear-Claw along!" he muttered. "And an Englisher, by the cut of his whiskers. And you, Ben—you look as if you'd been cleaned out!"

"You've hit it, pard—hit it plum-center. I got cleaned out of two hundred with half a dozen six-shooters lookin' me in the eye!"

"What? More road-agents on this trail?"

"I didn't say road-agents did it. I was a-wipin' out a stage-driver with four slipped aces ag'in' four kings I'd dropped to him and got caught. The reinsman swiped the cash and pulled before I could reach my tools and the whole crowd up at the station backed him. We had to leave."

"How many men are up there?"

"About twenty all told, and some of 'em hard 'uns! The youngest is the worst of the lot—Will Cody, the Pony Express Rider. You know him?"

"Yes; all grit and the quickest center-shot this side of the Big Divide. But he is on his route—he don't stay."

"He may! He is struck after a gal, I reckon, that's camped there and when you're through your oration with me, we'll have a talk about that same bit o' calico."

"To thunder with women! They're not in my deal. They'll ruin any hand that takes 'em up! They're all tongue an' no sand when it's wanted! Them's my sentiments!"

"But this one is a paying card if that man over there, Mr. Eugene Lercher, gets hold of her. He says she is heir to ten million pounds sterling!"

"Pounds o' what?"

"Pounds in money—five dollars to the pound—fifty millions of dollars!" cried Mr. Lercher, putting in his oar at all risks.

"Who do you take for a fool?" scornfully cried the road-agent. "A gal worth fifty million dollars a-campin' out on the plains!"

"But she don't know it yet. Nor the old gudgeon that has the care of her. But I do! And I can prove it, too!"

"That sounds like biz, if it isn't all sound! Who and what are you, and where from?"

"At home I'm a gentleman—here I hardly know what I am. I'm from London, England, and came across to see if I couldn't better my fortunes in your great West by speculating in cattle or mines or something of that sort."

"In Chicago a countryman of mine lay dying at a hotel. I did what I could to help him, and before he died got knowledge of the business he was on over here."

"He had been tracing a girl and her guardian all the way from a little town in Massachusetts out West to try to find her and carry her back to England, where her father is a great lord and one of the richest men in the kingdom. He had sent on his reports constantly till he took sick and died. I got hold of the girl's name and description and took up the trace where he left it, and that is why I, Eugene Lercher, am here."

"And you want to carry her back and get a reward?"

"Yes—a big reward. I want to carry her back as my wife and have her fortune for my reward!"

"How are you heeled now?"

"You mean how much money I have with me?"

"That's the ticket!"

"About two thousand dollars, with means behind me that I can draw on when we get where telegraphs and banks are found!"

"You're candid, considerin' the company you're in!"

"What use would there be in my lying? Your friend there knows all I've told you!"

"Yes—but he might not have squealed!"

"I don't care. I need you and your men to help me get the girl, and I'm willing to pay for it!"

"How much?"

"Ten thousand dollars cash in money and good checks the minute she is in my hands!"

"You're generous! A fifty-million gal for ten thousand dollars! We ought to get down on our knees and thank you, hadn't we?"

"I know it isn't much, but it's all I can reach just now! I'm honest!"

"You ought to be in this company!"

And for the first time in all this colloquy Omaha Charley allowed a sneering smile to brighten his sallow face.

"Cap—what time are the stage due?" asked one of the men.

"Never mind the stage! They never have much grease left after they've got past the Mormon line. If I go in with this galoot, we'll have to keep shady till we're ready to close in!"

"He'll make a bigger divvy after he has got the gal and her money!" said Faro Ben.

"How'll we reach him then?"

"Through me, Charley. I'm goin' to stick to him closer than a sheep tick in an old ram's wool till I get my share and yours too. And don't none o' you forgit it, either. I never went back on my word for friend or foe!"

"That's about his caliber!" said Omaha Charley, quietly. "There rattles the old hearse—we'd have been late to head it off anyway!"

The rattling wheels of the Overland coach as it went along the road by the stream, ten miles to the hour, was heard by them all.

"Boys—get breakfast early, before the dawn o' day. We don't want any smoke or smell o' cookin' after folks begin to travel the road!"

The men set to work in obedience to his orders, and a ration of grain was served out to the horses. For his horse is often life to the bandit of the border.

The leader now questioned Faro Ben closely as to the probable amount of resistance they would meet if they attacked the station and what booty could be got there, including the outfit of Jake Limbertoes.

It was decided between them that one of the band, a regular old trapper and mountaineer in looks and manner, should go into the station shortly after daylight and see whether the Yankee trader had pulled out or not, and make such other discoveries as he could.

CHAPTER V.

A NEW ARRIVAL.

YOUNG Cody, after starting the Englishman's party on the back track, followed them for full half a mile to hear that they kept on, for he could not see a rod ahead in the darkness.

Then he returned to the station and warned the station-hands of the threats he had overheard. He told them that he had driven the fellows off, but whether they had given up their villainous project was not known. He induced them to put out sentinels at all points of danger, and for his own part took post in front of the tent of Old Jake Limbertoes all night.

Early in the morning, even before it was fairly dawn, Libbie was out, blithe, fresh and cheerful, making coffee over the freshened camp-fire, while old Jake went to see to the feeding of her pony and his mules and horses.

When he returned Will Cody had a tin cup of smoking coffee in his hand, and Libbie was laughing immoderately.

"What's the matter, primrose? Has Master Will burned his mouth? You generally laugh when you scald me!"

"No—father Jake!" she said. "But he asked me to stir the sugar in his cup with my finger—said it would save half the sugar. And I did—just look at the face he is making over it!"

And again the air rung with her laughter. "I rather like red pepper—on my meat, but not much in my coffee!" said Will, as he gravely emptied the cup on the ground.

"She's up to tricks, lad, when the boys try to be spooney with her! But don't mind it—try another cup and I'll join you, and there'll be no red pepper in ours this time!"

"Not a speck!" said Libbie. "The chance was so good I had to dip my finger in the pepper-box. But I didn't think you'd get mad with your little sister, as you call me, Will!"

"I'm not mad—if I was I'd hate myself!" said Cody. "But it burnt like it was red-hot, and choked me up!"

Breakfast was now ready, and in the crisp morning air it went off like bean soup in a poor-house.

They had just got through, and Libbie was washing up the tin plates and cups when there appeared a new arrival at the station.

A man on a large, lean scraggy horse, with a led mule—the latter loaded down with beaver and other traps, camp-utensils, and hides and fur. The horse had clean limbs, and a wicked eye, and looked as if there was *go* in it if it once got started. The mule looked as meek and docile as the humblest of its breed—but it had a way of working one ear forward while the other pointed back, which meant hidden mischief to those who can read mules.

The man got slowly off his horse in front of the station, seeming stiff and sore from exposure or perhaps rheumatics—looked around a minute, and then, leaning on his old, battered rifle, asked if there was any "red-eye" sold in them diggin's—if so, he wanted a pint to keep off the ager.

He was dressed in greasy buckskin from head to foot and fairly scented the air with smoke from his camp-blackened and dirty outfit. His face looked as if soap and water had never mingled over its surface, and his tangled hair and beard would have defied a steel hatchet, much more a horn comb.

"Where did you camp last night, stranger?" asked Will Cody, who had seen the man coming up the stage-road.

"Down the creek a couple or three miles—I reckon!" said the old trapper, as he paid for his bottle of "red-eye," which the storekeeper brought out.

"Did you see a half-breed Indian and two white men go by your camp?"

"No—I hear hoof in the night, though, an' a waggin—but I was back in the brush off the road and didn't keer who had it long as my stock was handy!"

"That red-eye is powerful good—wouldn't mind havin' another pint to take along!" he added, as he emptied the bottle down his throat and handed it back to the storekeeper. "Anybody buyin' fur 'round here? I haven't no tearin' amount, but I'm on the sell when I find a buyer!"

"What'll you take for that old skeleton?" asked Will, pointing to the horse.

"That anamile an' me has wintered and summered in the Big Rockies since he an' I were colts. We've worn out three mules an' a jack-ass, an' we're not goin' to part now, stranger."

"How old might he be?" queried William.

"He might be forty year—but I reckon he is about ten year short o' that. Eats good—if yer don't think so put a bushel o' soaked corn under his nose!"

"'Twould take that to fill him up!" said Will, turning away.

He had his own ponies to look after.

"Wish I'd camped nigher by last night. Got any bread ter sell? Hain't had a bite for a month an' meat gits tiresome!"

A couple of pounds of pilot bread was purchased, and by this time nearly all the men at the station, coming out from breakfast, had gathered about the stranger.

"Which way are you bound?" asked the station-agent.

"Most anywhar if thar's a chance for fur! I've come in on the trail to sell what I've got an' lay in some stores. I work away back whar there's a chance to get suthin'. Fur-bearin' animals is *seacae* an' skeery! What ar' that outfit? Ar' he a trader?"

He pointed to Old Jake Limbertoes when he asked the question.

"Yes—maybe he'll take your fur if you want powder and lead for it, or things he has."

"I'll try him. Come along, Sneezzer—come along, Roany!"

Towing his lean horse and leaner mule for-

ward as he went, the old trapper limped up in front of Old Jake's tents.

"They said over thar you war a tradin' man," said he, as he stopped.

"I do some dickerin' when I git a chance," said the old man. "What have you got?"

"About two dozen pelts, beaver an' otter, a couple o' mink, an' no *eend* o' muskrat!"

"I think so by the smell! Je-ru-sa-lem! You'd flavor a hull caravan if one went by. Don't think I want to trade. Fur an' hides want *cur-in'* afore they're fit to buy."

"Mine's smoke-cured, Injun style, stranger—salt's *seacae* in the big hills! But I don't push trade on nobody. Whoa, Sneezzer! Whoa! This camp's too poor for us!"

And with great apparent difficulty the old trapper climbed up into his worn-out saddle and rode on up-stream, passing close by the Government dug-out, where a sergeant and seven or eight soldiers lay loafing in the warmth of the sun now over a half-hour high.

After he had passed them, he sat more erect in his saddle, and when it could not be observed he quickened the pace of both his animals.

A couple of miles up the road he turned off square and headed for a low range of hills that lay to the west of the road.

Reaching a grove, he picketed the mule securely in a good bed of grass, remounted his horse and at a swift gallop passed through a ravine in the hill-range and then behind it turned on a course which would flank the station and carry him completely concealed back to the hidden camp of Omaha Charley.

For he was the spy of the party, his rig and outfit got up specially to enable him to make unsuspected reconnoissances upon positions which were considered dangerous of approach unless their strength was fully known.

His success had been complete—even Will Cody was too young and inexperienced then to see through what to an older eye might have proved a thin disguise.

CHAPTER VI.

A FRIGHTENED AGENT.

"WELL, Rolf! What's the news—spit her out lively! The boys are gittin' tired o' layin' off in the shade."

Thus Omaha Charley addressed the "trapper" when he got into camp an hour or so before noon, with a tired look after his long round-about ride.

"There's seventeen men at the station all told—agent, storekeeper, drivers, riders and stablemen. One heathen Chinese. Above—a good rifle-shot, eight soldiers and a sergeant hole in a dug-out. The old Yank and his gal haven't pulled out and didn't give no sign when they would. I tried to get on a trade with the old rip, but he swore my fur wasn't half-cured and it was no go."

"The outfit is high-scented. We've kept it too long," said the chief, smiling. "Did you count Will Cody in?"

"Yes—with the station men. He'll go back when the Express comes from the West, I reckon."

"And I'll put a hole through his carcass when he goes by!" cried Faro Ben, bitterly.

"No you won't! I run this show, an' don't you forget it!" said Omaha Charley. "The Pony Express once attacked by us and all our game is up. They never carry anything of value that we could use. There's no treasure-box on a pony's back. And they're true to the hour."

"Let one miss his time and the whole line would swarm with blue-coats lookin' for them that stopped him! When any shootin' goes on along this line—I'll be there!"

"You're not goin' back on our game, be you, pard?"

"No; not if I see a square chance to win! But I'm not goin' to ride in to that station after the girl. When the old man takes the trail and goes on, we'll not be far off."

"But buckin' against seventeen well-armed plainsmen and eight or nine soldiers with only ten in our crowd is thinner than I take in mine. There's no sugar in the bottom o' that glass!"

"Then we've got to wait!" sighed Lercher.

"Take it easy, man. I'm going in there myself after Bill Cody goes down to the road. He's the only one, I reckon, that would be like to know me. Him an' me came near havin' a row once talkin' about the Kansas troubles where his father was killed, and he'll not forgit me. I'd have killed him only he shot first an' hit my pistol hand. There's the scar yet."

"Dare you ride in alone?" asked the Englishman, in wonder.

"Yes; for if I have to git in a hurry there'll be no one in my way an' I can shoot promisc'us without putting lead among my own friends. I always know what I'm about."

"That settles it!" said Faro Ben.

And he squatted on a blanket and began stock-ing cards again by way of practice and amusement.

"Will—good brother Will, for you told me to call you so, must you go back when the Pony Express gets in from the West?"

Libbie's eyes were almost tearful when she asked this question of young Cody.

She had prevailed on her father to lay over that day at the station because Will could not go till after noon.

"Yes, little sister; I'm hired and must do my duty. But I've been talking to your father—I don't know no other father while he's around, and he has agreed not to pull out till I send word or get back here myself from down the road. If them three skunks have kept the trail and gone on back to the settlements, I'll know it and send you word. If they've skipped the road, I'll know there's mischief afloat, and I'll be back here with you both before daylight."

"Oh, Will—how can we ever pay you for your goodness?"

"Little sister, by just thinkin' of my dear baby sisters at home and my good mother, whom I'm workin' to support. I took a likin' to you 'cause you was alone and good and innocent, and we don't see that kind a great deal out here. You're just like a sister to me, and I'd fight to the last gasp to keep you from harm!"

"God will bless you, Will, for this. Some day I may be able to do you some good!"

"You've done me a heap o' good already, little one. If it weren't for you, I might ha' been over there at the station among that drinkin', swearin', gamblin' crowd—maybe takin' a hand in! It makes me better to be with you!"

"I am glad, dear brother Will. It seems good to have you near—you are so brave and truthful! I shall be lonesome on the long, long road to California!"

"It is a weary road, little one, but they say it is next to paradise when you get there. If it was not so far from my mother and sisters, I'd like to go along—but there goes the horn—it's time for me to saddle up and be ready."

Ten minutes later a pony covered with foam, a rider thick with dust, dashed in front of the station, threw his mail-bag to Will Cody, who was already mounted, and away the brave young man rode at the rate of a mile in every four minutes to be kept up to the end of his route and thence on by another!

The Express had been gone an hour or more when a man dashed up to the station with an air of great importance. Splendidly mounted, armed with a Colt's repeating-rifle, two revolvers and a knife in his belt, he looked fit for any service, no matter how desperate.

"I'm the new Route Inspector," he told the agent, while a stableman held his horse. "Must see all your animals, take note of their condition, know what forage you have on hand, and all that!"

"Shall I have your horse put in and fed?" asked the agent.

"No—I'll go to the station as soon as I'm through here."

The agent was all attention. He thought it was all right, though no such official had come over the route before.

When the stables and corral were examined, of course Old Jake Limbertoes's stock was found there.

"Whose mules and old horses are these? They haven't our brand on them!" cried the agent.

"They belong to an old Yankee trader who is camped out there. We let him put them in for safety."

"It is against the rules of the company, sir, and you ought to know it. Even to allow campers on our own grounds infringes the regulations. I shall have to report you, sir!"

"I'll have the animals turned out and have the old man move right on, sir!" said the frightened agent.

"See that you do it, sir, and I will suppress the report this time!"

Ten minutes finished the business-like inspection, and the new Route Inspector threw a silver dollar to the man who had held his horse, sprung into the saddle, and galloped off to the West.

Watching the trail carefully he struck the point where the "old trapper" had left the road, followed his track, and when he reached the grassy swale where the pack-mule was picketed he took up the picket-rope, and, as he rode back to camp, the mule trotted after him.

Thus Omaha Charley got in his work.

CHAPTER VII.

"HALT."

"An' so I've got to move for that stuck-up creetur' who rid by my camp with his nose poked up like a p'inter scentin' game! Thank Mercy he isn't Lord of *all* creation, and there's wood, water an' grass that he can't boss!"

These words fell from Old Jake's lips, angrily, when the agent told him he had been "gone over," rough-shod, by the inspector, for breaking station rules of which he knew nothing before.

"I've made a promise I'd not leave here till I heard from below!" said the old man, in addition. "I'll keep it by movin' camp up-stream outside o' your line and stakin' my stock to grass there. 'Tisn't much trouble, and I'm thankful for what you hev done and willin' to pay for all I've had."

"There's no pay wanted, and if 'twasn't that he threatened to report me, I'd keep you a month if you wanted to stay. We've hearts, we

station men have, but we must obey orders or leave!"

"That's jist so!" said the old man, "I don't complain."

Helped by willing hands, the old man had his camp made just outside the station grounds in less than half an hour, nearer to water than he was before, and had a good lot of wood ready cut piled before his camp-fire.

Libbie was pleased with the change. They had been so near the station that the men kept passing to and fro just to look at her. A live woman, and a pretty one, was a curiosity out there.

"I've worked up your game to a fine point!" said Omaha Charley, when he dismounted at his camp.

He addressed Lercher and Faro Ben.

"How?" came from the lips of both men.

"I assumed to be Route Inspector of all the stations on the line, and the agent swallowed the bait, hook and all. I ordered all outside animals out of the corrals and no campers within eighty rods of the station. Before I left, the old Yankee's mules were outside and he was striking camp. To-morrow we'll find him on the road, for it is so late he'll not go far to-night!"

"Great Harry! You're a thing on plans!" cried Lercher, in glad surprise.

"I'm better on execution!" said the chief.

"And now, boys, hurry up the supper—I'm as hungry as a wolf. Rolf—there comes your mule and pack. I let her up and she came in with me! Unload to leeward of the camp, for the outfit is high-scented. No wonder you couldn't sell!"

"Did you see the girl?" asked Lercher.

"Yes—I'm no woman's man, but she looks like a daisy!"

"Which she are, an' don't you forgit it!" said Faro Ben, as he sharpened a forked stick to broil a trout on.

One of the men had been fishing.

"Pile in the grub—eat hearty to-night, men, for we'll pull out at break o' day, flank the station, and strike the road beyond it before we breakfast! We've business ahead!"

The chief, having given this order, proceeded to set an example by dipping his cup into the coffee-kettle, and cutting a slice of roast elk-meat from a haunch before the fire. All the men seemed to have hearty appetites, such as life in the open air and plenty of exercise are sure to give.

"There's one thing we haven't thought of, pard Charley!" said Faro Ben, after supper was over. "Will Cody has gone down the line, and he'll find out that my party has skipped the road. He'll be apt to send word back to the station, or come back himself to try and have us looked up!"

"If he does it before daylight, some on the road may hear music!" said Omaha Charley.

And he detailed four men to the road to keep watch, two at a time, and halt any one who tried to pass up the trail. They were not to fire if it could be helped, but to capture and hold any one going by, for their leader's inspection.

This point settled, fires were lowered, horses fed and picketed, and the camp laid at rest.

So still were all in a little while, that the distant dash of the little river rushing along its rocky bed—the mournful sighing of the wind through the pine needles, and the occasional stamp of a fretful horse alone was heard.

Thus it was until near midnight. All were asleep except the single horse-guard ever kept on post to avoid surprise and stampedes, when that sentinel heard a sudden clatter of swift-flying hoofs sounding from the main road.

A second or two he listened, and then sprang to alarm his chief, for he heard the stern word "halt!" and instantly there rung out a rapid volley of shots—he could not tell how many.

In an instant the whole camp was afoot, and Omaha Charley, sternly ordering all but two men to remain where they were and await his return, rushed down to the road.

He heard the sound of a horse, or horses speeding fast toward the station as he ran toward the spot where his men were posted.

When he got there he heard a gurgling cry—a low groan of agony, and calling out the names of his men, asked what was the matter.

"We're done for, Cap—there was two of 'em, and one was Will Cody. They shot close and hard!"

This answer in choking gasps was all the satisfaction he got until a light was made by igniting a handful of dry brush with a match.

Then three dead men, and the fourth dying, were revealed.

The head of one was crushed fairly in and the mark of the steel-shod hoof of a horse was in his face, while his clinched hand still grasped part of a broken bridle-rein.

"Poor Jim—you're hit hard!" said the chief, kneeling by the side of the dying man and lifting his head.

"Yes—Cap—it settles me. Don't let Molly an' the kid go hungry—tell her—"

The message was not spoken—a gasp and all was over.

"Gather up the arms and follow me—we can't carry their bodies off! But I'll pay for this night's work if it costs fifty lives!"

The tone in which these hurried orders were

given told the wild fury which raged in that outlaw's heart.

"Put out every sign of fire—mount and follow me silently in line!" was the stern command given by Omaha Charley, when he got back to his camp. "Lead the spare horses—leave nothing behind!"

Not a question was asked. The fact that the four road-watchers were not with him told their fate. He was not the man to leave a wounded or helpless companion.

"The whole station will be down there when Will Cody tells his tale!" he said to one of his men, as they rode off west.

He pointed when he spoke in the direction where his dead partners were stretched on the hard ground.

"Maybe they'll leave the girl unprotected! Let's make a bold sweep for her!" cried Faro Ben.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE WILL.

In accordance with wishes both written and expressed by him before his death, Lord Glenarvon—who before he reached his peerage was known as the Honorable Walter Edgecombe—was laid in the ancestral vaults of his race with little worldly pomp and show.

Mourned deeply by all his intimate friends and associates—even more by loving servants and retainers, there was an impressiveness in the simple ceremonies of the church which was the more deeply felt in the absence of idle pagantry.

Charitable where charity was called for; benevolent without ostentation; indulgent to a large tenantry; just to all with whom he had concern, he left a void where he had shone the brightest star in his social firmament.

He had ever been a grave, but not a stern man since he filled the peerage, and was only noticeable for his singular avoidance of the society of ladies. Never, except when it could not be avoided, did he approach a female, and only the coldest civility marked his intercourse then.

The funeral was over, and in the interval between that time and the noon of the next day, speculation was rife as to what disposition had been made by the deceased of his vast properties—lands, houses, bonds, the great castle and its immense grounds, horses, carriages, plate, paintings, and banked moneys and securities.

Many of his friends had been specially invited to be present at the opening and reading of the will.

The hour came at last, and the great room known as the library in the castle was nearly filled.

The lawyer who for years had attended to the business of the peer, was there with the will. The witnesses, who but a few weeks before had affixed their signatures thereto, were present. Also the three physicians who had heard his last words and seen his life close.

In the background, many of them weeping, were the servants most immediately under their late master.

Some few strangers, led by curiosity, had gathered also—supposed to be connected with the public press; they were allowed to remain.

With a face indescribably sad, yet noble and full of dignity, Neville Normand sat at the table in the center of the room on which lay the document which was to tell who would be heir to all those great possessions.

The old valet, his face pallid with grief, stood near the secretary who had served his master since boyhood.

An antique clock in deep tones struck twelve.

The old lawyer rose, and taking up a large sealed package said, in a slow and solemn tone:

"Bear witness all—ere I break these seals, to this, my declaration.

"This package thus sealed, but first drawn up by me, word for word, under the direction of the late Lord Glenarvon, has never been out of my possession since it was duly made, signed and witnessed. Therefore, let no man doubt that it is other than the last will and testament of the noble peer, whom we all mourn."

Thus speaking—he broke the seals and unrolled the parchment on which it was written.

It ran thus—as he read it word for word:

"Know all whom it may concern that I, Walter Edgecombe, Lord of Glenarvon, a Peer of the British realm, though feeble in health am clear in mind and sound in reason.

"Knowing therefore that death must come to all, in this state of mind and body I do make this my last will and testament.

"I bequeath my body to the earth—my soul to the God who gave it me.

"Next, to each servant of my household who shall remain in service in the castle while he or she lives, if they so desire, one thousand pounds sterling.

"To my faithful valet, Thomas Jones, five thousand pounds and his present salary so long as he remains with and attends my secretary and best friend, Neville Normand, Esquire.

"To each tenant on my various farms and rented estates, five years' rent free.

"To the poor of this parish, yearly, to be paid through the rector and by him piously divided—five thousand pounds in yearly payments of five hundred pounds each year until exhausted.

"Finally—in trust, to my dearest friend, Neville Normand, Esquire, son of Cecil Normand of Eagle-

thorpe—all and undivided, the residue of my property, castles, houses, lands, moneys and effects, real and personal—to this end and on these conditions:

"1st. He is to keep up this castle in its present state as his home.

"2d. He is as soon as maybe to proceed to the United States of America, seek after and find my lawful daughter, Elizabeth Edgecombe, using documents hereunto annexed to enable him to discover her and to bring her home to dwell in this castle.

"3d. If God wills that my said daughter and the said Neville Normand should, after meeting so like each other as to be willing to be joined in marriage—my whole property, except the bequests first named, to be jointly theirs forever. If not and they do not join issue—the property to be equally divided between both.

"Praying to God they may wed—I leave, if they do, in a black ebony box in my private safe, a sealed package which they must deliver in person to the reigning sovereign of this kingdom on the day after their marriage soonest possible to reach the presence of that sovereign. In this hope alone rests that the title of Glenarvon may still be continued.

"And may the blessing of the Most High rest on all I love!"

The lawyer read the noble signature, and also the names of the witnesses who, being present, rose and said they were correct.

For a moment a deathly stillness followed.

Then, in a far corner, a shrill voice shouted:

"The will is void! He had no daughter! It was a SON, and I AM HERE!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE RAID.

A LITTLE after midnight of the day when the pretended Route Inspector went through the Sweetwater Station, Will Cody and a comrade of about his own age and style, named Frank Powell, ran their horses into the station at full speed and announced to the alarmed garrison that they had been halted and beset by armed men three miles back at what was known as "The Bend."

"I reckon we cleaned 'em out, but I'm not sure!" said Cody. "I emptied two revolvers in the crowd!"

"Old Rattler, my roan stallion, struck the gallop down that had him by the rein! And I gave 'em six or eight ounces of lead!" added his partner, young Powell, who had come on from school to spend a vacation with his chum.

"Let's go back with men enough to see it out, if there are any more there!" cried Will. "Give me a fresh horse, some of you boys, while I load my shooting-irons!"

All was excitement, and soon—just as quick as they could arm and mount, fifteen men, including the two young men, were on the back trail at a swift gallop.

Two or three brought lanterns to light when they got there.

Thus it was, that Omaha Charley and the remnant of his band with Faro Ben, Lercher and the Indian had just pulled out of their camp when Will Cody and his crowd reached the scene of their late "tussle."

When it was reached and lanterns lighted four dead bodies told of the good work put in by the two "Boys," and that done so suddenly that neither of them got a scratch.

"Here's the fellow Old Rattler laid out!" cried Powell, turning up a dead face scarred with a horse-shoe.

"Their arms are all gone—they had pistols, for I fired at the flash!" said Cody. "There must have been more to carry the arms off. Let's look up the trail!"

Omaha Charley and his mates, tearing through the bushes in the dark, had left very plain signs, and two of the men on foot, with lanterns, took up their track, and followed by the rest on horseback, were not a great while in finding the deserted camp of the outlaws.

The camp-fires had been kicked to pieces and partially stamped out, but burning brands and hot cinders showed the work was very recent.

Meat, cooked and raw, hung around on the trees—the grass was all fed off over a large space, and many other signs made the station men think at least twenty-five or thirty men had been camped and hidden in there.

Cody, wild with joy over the exploit of himself and Powell in running such a gantlet in safety and laying out so many of the hated road-agents, insisted on looking up their trail and finding out which way they had gone.

It was found after quite a search, made difficult by their going off in single file, making but one path, and this also hindered them from getting any correct idea of the real numbers.

For a half-mile the course of the outlaws trended nearly northwest until they had cleared nearly all the timber.

Then they headed up westerly and almost parallel with the road and river, so as to flank the station about a mile back.

When he struck this course, young Cody felt fearfully uneasy. For the first time in the heat of his excitement he thought of Libbie and her father, and how defenseless the station and the camp of Old Jake would be if attacked when almost or quite two-thirds of the station men were with him.

"Men—put out every light, and let us head for the station and get there as soon as we can! Should these cusses take it in their heads to go

in there while we're gone, they'll clear the ranch!"

This was but too evident, the moment they thought.

The lights were put out and spurs made use of freely. But they had wasted a great deal of time in their search. And though they did not know it then, their lights had been seen by the outlaws in their flight, and the keen-witted outlaw chief took in about the actual state of facts.

So when Bear-Claw offered to stampede the stock from the stables and corral, he told him to do it, and out of revenge for his lost comrades he would back him with all his force, for he knew he could reach the station long before the party who had lights around his old camp could.

It was well toward morning—the eastern star was high, when Cody and his party, under whip and spur, struck the main road a mile or more yet from the station.

And away off, even above the clatter of their horses' iron-shod feet, they heard the shrill yell of an Indian ringing through the air. Then a sound as of rumbling thunder.

"Great heavens! All the stock is off!" cried the station-agent, who was one of the party. "It's a stampede!"

"And worse too!" groaned Will Cody, as he heard shot after shot fired, followed by ringing cheers.

Madly the men spurred for the station, getting there just in time to save it, for it was on fire, while three of the stablemen lay dead on the floor—one, the man who had kicked the half-breed from the room the night before, was scalped, and four great furrows dug across his face made the well-known mark of Bear-Claw.

"Where is Old Jake's camp?" shouted Cody, while some of the other men put the fire out in the station.

"Away up the stream, seventy or eighty rods!" cried the agent. "He moved camp yesterday!"

Will waited to hear no more.

"Come on, Frank!" he shouted—"come with me, pard!"

And he rode madly off to the west, followed by Powell, while the other men rushed to put out fire that just blazed in the empty stable.

Not a living man or animal, either of friend or foe, was in sight there. The outlaws had done their swift work and gone.

Will dashed by the soldiers' dug-out just as it was light enough to be seen, and narrowly escaped being shot therefrom, for he was fired on from one of the loopholes as he sped by.

On—one—to him his horse never went so slow—he rode, and already in the gloam of morning he saw the white tents away up the stream that told him where Old Jake was camped. Powell was close behind.

All at once his blood ran cold—every vein seemed iced. For a piercing scream reached his ear and he saw a group of horsemen almost flying up the road.

He did not pause a second to think of odds, or if help was behind; he drove his almost worn-out horse on with spurs that dripped blood, and did not pause until the horse, trembling, fell from sheer exhaustion right in front of the tents.

Cody staggered from his horse and nearly fell over the body of poor Old Jake which lay in the open front of Libbie's tent.

Wildly Cody shouted her name—there was no answer, and with a groan he looked up the stream in the gray of morning in the direction he had seen the horsemen ride.

They were out of sight already.

"Gone! Gone! The infernal wretches have carried her off!" he cried, in a wild agony of sorrow, weeping bitterly.

But a faint moan from the lips of poor Old Jake Limbertoe called his attention to him and he bent down and spoke just as Frank Powell got to his side on his foaming horse.

"Old man—where are you hit?—is it bad?" cried the young man, as he raised poor Jake up on his knee so he could look at him.

A ghastly cut on the head, still bleeding freely, seemed the only wound.

Powell, who had commenced to study medicine that spring, at once got some cold water and washed the wound, while Will got bandages from inside the tent—some of poor Libbie's clothes still hanging there.

Some of the water applied to his lips revived the old man enough to bring back speech and consciousness.

"Be I in Kingdom Come? Where's Libbie?" were the first feeble words he uttered.

"Gone—gone! She is not here! Carried off, I fear!" said Will.

"Yes, yes!" groaned the old man, "that gambler, that Britisher and three more men an' an Injun—I saw 'em an' jumped afore her tent, an' that's all I know till now. The Lord help the poor gal if she's in their hands—she'd better be dead!"

"They'll not hurt her if they think she's rich till they get her money. I'll strike their trail and get her back, old man; don't take on so—I'll get her back as sure as I live!"

"Yes; take comfort," said young Powell, soothingly; "we'll get help and follow them up

and rescue her! You're sure there were no more than six or seven in all?"

"No more here—there might ha' been more on the road," said the old man, now able to stand, for his wound had stopped bleeding and he felt stronger after a long draught of ice-cold water from the mountain-fed stream.

"Powell, your horse isn't so bad off as mine. Go back to the station and see that sergeant at the dug-out and the station-agent. I want all the men I can get to help me recover poor Libbie. I'll get on their trail, an' never quit till I've got her back!"

"The Lord bless you, boy—I'm with you! They haven't run off my stock—I've some creeters there that has *go* in 'em, an' there's Libbie's pony for you to ride, Will! You're light-heft an' that pony was the fastest in the Pawnee Nation. It cost me a dozen blankets an' a keg o' Dupont's best rifle-powder—it did!"

"Ride back and tell them we'll mount ten men out here in some way," said Will, and young Powell hurried off.

Then, as Old Jake found some spirits which he kept for medicine—not sale—and took enough to strengthen him, they went and looked out the best mules and horses in the old man's drove.

When Powell returned he was followed by eight men, four soldiers, well-armed, and four of the station hands, not including the agent, who could not leave his post, but came to see what he could do.

"You let some other lad take my Express route till I get off this racket!" said Will Cody, addressing the agent. "All the companies in the world can't call me off the trail till I find this poor old man's little girl!"

It was a hard outfit to follow well-armed, well-mounted and desperate men with, but in less than an hour from the time Will Cody reached Jake's camp he headed nine men—for he would not let the old man leave his camp, he was so weak and broken-down. Striking the plain trail he put out at the best speed they could make with such horses and mules as they had to ride. Libbie's pony, full of life and spirit, could have soon run out of sight of all of them, but the boy leader knew he could do nothing single-handed against a crowd and trusted to the perseverance he meant to exercise to overtake the others in time.

An hour or more of start at full speed in the abduction would place them at least ten or twelve miles ahead, and it could not be overcome in a hurry—a gain of that distance.

The trail was plain at first, for nothing had been over the road since the outlaws rode up, and, for a wonder, they kept the beaten track until almost in sight of the next station.

Then they branched off to the left and crossed the Sweetwater where it ran wide and shallow and went behind some wooded hills to the east of the stream.

Patiently, as fast as he could go without "winding" his animals, Will led the way, his keen eye never leaving the trail except when he looked ahead in hopes of getting a distant glimpse of those whom he and his friends were following.

Will once held back long enough to let the corporal in charge of the soldiers ride up and speak to him.

"Why didn't you fellows fire on the outlaws when they passed your dug-out?" asked Will.

"You had to give me a salute when I went by!"

"It was too dark!" said the corporal. "Didn't see 'em. Orders is, if attacked in the night to hold the dug-out till we know what odds we have to fight!"

"Yes, and you'd obey orders if you knew you could save fifty lives in a square outside fight!" cried Will, angered at the soldier's cool answer.

"Sart'in, sure! A soldier has no business to know or do anything outside of orders!"

Will ground his teeth and muttered:

"You're under my orders just now, and they'll be obeyed or something 'll drop—bet your life on that."

And he rode on faster than ever.

By noon Will and his party had covered over thirty-five miles, counting the stations which the trail flanked and always passed out of sight.

Foot-marks where the leading party had halted at different times induced Will to correctly conjecture they had led horses with them and occasionally changed off.

They had crossed and recrossed the river three times when Will called a short halt, for his men and animals were getting very tired. A little patch of good grass gave the latter a chance to pick some nutriment and the men were given time to lunch on the scanty amount of food they had been thoughtful enough to bring. The soldiers were best off in that line. One of them might forget his cartridge-box—but haversack and canteen—never!

Cody knew the country they were going over, well. He had freighted under Russell and Major over the whole route since he was a boy of thirteen—often left the train to hunt on the way, and had been over it so often he knew every hill ravine and stream upon the route.

"They'll not go beyond the 'Devil's Echo' before they camp!" he said, when after a half-hour of rest he and his party remounted. "And we'll catch 'em there, I feel sure!"

"What kind of a place and how far off?" asked the corporal.

"A sharp bend in the road and river—high bluffs overhanging both. River runs like a mill-race, all foam and froth, over boulders and rifts. Not over ten or fifteen miles; we'll make it yet by dark or before if we use our spurs instead of our tongues!"

"What makes you think they'll camp there?"

"It's a long ride and the best camp-ground on the trail—three or four acres good grass, wood handy, and a big spring not four rods from the road. Close up—I'll be there while it is light enough to see!" cried the young scout.

CHAPTER X.

THE ABDUCTION.

LIBBIE, awakened by the yelling and firing at the station, had sprung from her bed and dressed and was about to call her father, who always slept very sound, when she heard the rush of horsemen near at hand and saw a party riding furiously toward their camp.

"Father! FATHER, wake up—we're in danger!" she cried, and darted back to her tents to get a small double-barreled pistol which she kept under her pillow at night, generally.

It was mislaid, and she forgot in her terror and excitement in dressing that she had put it in her pocket when she rose.

She heard her father cry out:

"Damnation—what d'ye want here?"

Then there came a sickening sound—the thud of a crushing blow, and he was still, while a tall, strong man rushed into the tent, grasped her up as if she had been an infant, carried her out and threw her up before a man on a large horse who wound his strong arms about her form and shouted:

"The game is ours, pards—a loose rein and bloody spurs is the cry!"

And with one wild scream of terror she fainted, for she felt that she was lost.

She had been carried miles before she recovered consciousness enough to know where she was, and then they had halted. She was given water to drink and offered liquor. The first she accepted—the last she refused.

"Miss," said Omaha Charley, "I boss this crowd and am to be paid for carrying you off, but if you will be quiet and make no fuss, you shall be treated well. The first galoot that speaks a disrespectful word to you—goes under! They hear me and you hear me. If you're strong enough to ride, you shall have a horse to yourself."

"I am strong enough to ride alone, sir—and I will be quiet, for it would do no good for me to be otherwise," said Libbie, thankful for even these favors. "Will you please tell me, sir, where you are taking me to?"

"I hardly know myself just now, young lady—the first thing is to keep out of the way of immediate pursuit. I lost four good men last night on account of listening to your friend over there, who claims that you are a great heiress when you have your rights."

Charley pointed to the Englishman, Lercher.

"He my friend? That whiskered baboon was hanging around our camp two or three days, and I wish he was hanging somewhere else now. He is not and never will be a friend of mine!" she cried, angrily.

"You young wildcat—I'll—"

Mr. Lercher got no further.

The back of a hard hand came upon his mouth so suddenly that he reeled and nearly went over on the ground. The hand belonged to Omaha Charley.

"You heard me say no one should utter an unkind word to her!" said the outlaw. "The next time you try it I'll send a bullet through your fool head!"

Lercher winced under the blow and reproof, but he knew better than to resent, by word or action.

The easiest-riding horse among the led animals was now brought up, a saddle so arranged she could sit sideways with a short stirrup, and the party remounting rode on again at a rapid pace.

Libbie noticed that they crossed the stream several times and supposed it was done to throw pursuers off the track, though the real reason was to avoid the stations and consequent observation.

The party had left camp so hurriedly that, with the exception of some hard biscuit and a few rations of tea, sugar and coffee, and a small quantity of spirits for medicine, they had no means of sustenance along now.

The biscuit were shared out sparingly for a lunch at one of their brief halts when they stopped to change horses, but as night approached more than one of the party regretted that they had not brought some of their meat from the last camp.

"Me find some and bring 'em—you not go too fast!" said Bear-Claw, turning his horse off on a course a little out of their line.

Within an hour he was up to them, his horse pretty well "blown" with hard riding. He had the hind-quarters of a young antelope behind his saddle.

"Me got supper an' breakfast!" he said, as he rode up to the party.

Then riding close to Omaha Charley, he said in a low tone:

"Give me 'nother horse—we got to ride fast till we get to Devil Bend! There good place to fight!"

"Why, what's up?" asked the chief, seeing from the Indian's look that he had news.

"Give me horse—this one tired—then me tell!" said the half-breed, still speaking so low only the chief heard him.

A halt long enough for an exchange of horses was made, and then, while they rode rapidly on, the Indian closed up with the leader and said:

"Three, four mile back—no more, come men—ride fast for us! Will, Pony Expressman, one—some soldier too!"

"How many in all?" asked Charley, quietly.

"So many—some on mule, some on horse!"

The Indian held up his two open hands, the fingers and thumbs indicating ten.

"How far to the place you call Devil's Bend?"

"We get there—go like this, one hour!"

"Our horses may stand it, but they're pretty well tired now! We've made a long run—I thought to camp the first good spot."

"Good place there—close to Devil Bend; you whip them back. Road no more wide ten feet—deep water one side, high rocks other—big place for fight—one man fight half-dozen there!" said the Indian, in his crude talk.

"Well—if they come too near, we'll see what they're made of. Drop back and give me the signal if they close too fast!"

In all this talk, their tones were so low and their appearance so unmoved, that none of the party but those two knew that they were being pursued and that those who followed were closing up. Their route had been almost all the time under "cover," so to speak, and they could see but a short distance either to the front or rear.

CHAPTER XI.

THE LOST HEIRESS.

EVERY one in the great library, even the lawyer and the old physicians, sprung to their feet in wild amazement when that shrill, weird voice uttered the startling words:

"The will is void! He had no daughter! It was a son, and I am here!"

"Who dares thus to belie the honored dead?" cried Neville Normand, in deep, indignant tones. "Let him stand forth and be seen and heard at once!"

"This is the chap that spoke, your honor!" cried a stout gardener, from the lower end of the room, and he dragged forward a trembling old man with an idiotic face who was well-known in the parish and regarded as an imbecile, harmless, except when in some way he got hold of strong drink. Then he was ugly.

As he was actually older than the deceased peer his words would have been ridiculous at any other time than on this grave occasion.

Trembling and whimpering he stammered out as he was led forward:

"It wasn't me who said it. It was the devil, that gets into me sometimes. Let poor old Jamie go—don't hang him, 'cause the devil set him up!"

"Take the poor fellow out and do not treat him unkindly!" said Mr. Normand. "He is not responsible for his words!"

Then, turning to those present, he thanked them with dignity for their presence, and dismissed all but the lawyer, whom he requested to remain as well as Jones, the valet of the late peer, and by the will now made his own personal attendant.

As soon as the room was cleared the young man addressed the lawyer, at the same time telling Jones to sit down and wait.

"Mr. Sturtevant," he said, "I am about to ask a great personal favor of you. I am aware that you are a bachelor and live in 'chambers,' as they say, by yourself. As you will still have all the business of this vast estate to look after, in a legal sense, and the castle must be kept open, I pray you to come here and make your residence within it."

"Thus you can keep all the old servants here, use the coach and horses when you require them and enable me to feel easy in my absence. For I have no idea how long the search I go upon will take. I ask it as a favor."

"One I could scarcely refuse, considering the comforts and luxuries I shall find here contrasted with those of my lonely bachelor quarters," replied the lawyer. "That being settled, when do you propose to start?"

"Immediately—by the very first steamer from Liverpool!"

"You have good data to work upon in this mission?"

"Not the best. The agent of Lord Glenarvon had succeeded in finding where the girl and her guardian—supposed by her to be her father—had lived since her infancy. They had started for the West—the guardian and the girl—and he had traced and followed them as far as Chicago, where he was taken sick."

"Before he was so ill as to be laid up entirely he had learned that the old man—the guardian of Elizabeth Edgecombe, had gone by railroad to either Council Bluffs or Omaha—two places as the map shows only separated by a great river, the Missouri, I think, and almost on the bor-

ders of civilization, so to speak, in the Great West.

"There the agent learned that the old man intended to fit out as a trader, and thus to cross by the great Overland route to California."

"This was our last news—except the news of our agent's death, sent by an Englishman whose name is on my memorandum."

"All you have to do then is to get on the trace of this guardian at one or other of the last places named and to follow it up. It does not look to be very difficult."

"No; yet to one who has never traveled much and not at all in the United States it is not a trifling undertaking. But I shall not hesitate nor give up until so far as within my power the wishes of my best friend are fully carried out."

"I beg of you to make for me an attested copy of the will in your own hand, so that when I find Elizabeth Edgecombe I may show her what was the desire of her father and that she is heir to a vast fortune no matter what befalls."

"And to secure her, before I leave, I shall will all my share to her in case death in any shape should reach me before I find her."

"You are thoughtful. Heaven forefend that your young life should end when all is so bright before you."

"I am truly in no haste to die and shall exercise all the prudence and care possible to preserve my life. And Jones—the good old valet, who has traveled in America with his lordship, and who was present at his marriage, will be with me."

"Yes, sir—I shall never leave you while I live!" said the old servant.

"Then—all now being understood, it will not take long for us to prepare for the voyage and journey. Ample provided with funds and letters of credit, I shall use the fastest means of conveyance consistent with safety."

"You did not mention the name under which the young lady is now known," said the thoughtful lawyer.

"A most singular name. That of her guardian and supposed father there is Jacob Limbertoes—she is known as Libbie Limbertoes."

"The very oddity of the name will aid you in finding her!"

"The oddity of the name will undoubtedly help, and the agent wrote that he had heard the man was as odd as his name. A genuine but strictly honest Yankee who was all love and devotion to the girl, whom he had caused to be educated and brought up in a manner superior to her station. She was also reported to the agent as being very beautiful."

"So much the better for you, my good friend, should matters turn out as the late peer prayed they would!"

"Alas—I have little thought of that!" said the young executor. "My life has been so much devoted to his late lordship's service that I have not gone into female society at all, and have not cultivated the ways by which ladies are pleased and won."

"Books have been my companions when I was disengaged, and I feel myself lost when I enter into converse with female members of society."

"No matter. You are good-looking, high-toned, honorable and manly. Such qualities will win on a true woman-nature always, and mark me, I prognosticate that if you find the lady you will love her and your love will be returned!"

"Thanks for the prophecy! If it proves real—you shall not regret it, my dear sir!"

Three days later Neville Normand stood on the deck of the stanch steamer Britannia, bound to the city of Boston and just ready to sail.

The young man had left the care of his baggage and the arrangement of his state-room entirely to his valet and had no present cares on his mind.

"Is this a good season for a safe and rapid voyage?" he asked of the old captain whose acquaintance he had formed in the office of the company when he engaged his passage.

"Good—only it has been warm of late, and we'll have to keep a bright lookout for icebergs in mid-ocean!" was the answer.

CHAPTER XII.

A HOT TRAIL.

WHEN Bear-Claw, the skilled hunter and cunning half-breed, saw the party of Will Cody closing up in the rear of the outlaws, he thought he had not been seen.

This was not the case. Cody, with ears all alert, had heard the report of his gun when he shot the antelope. Dashing forward to a hill that overlooked the land from which the report came, he saw the Indian just after he had secured his meat, heading for the trail of his companions, and readily recognized him, for, like most half-breeds, Bear-Claw was a dandy in his dress and wore a scarlet blanket over his buckskin suit when he was on horseback.

Will hurried to rejoin his party, and reporting his discovery, urged them on at the most rapid gait they could force upon their tired animals.

And it was when he was thus engaged that Bear-Claw discovered Will and his party and

then dashed forward to report what he had seen to Omaha Charley.

"The trail is hot, boys—look at that!" cried Will, when they last crossed the stream and were within less than two miles of the "Bend" spoken of so often.

He pointed to stones yet dripping water on the bank where the other horsemen had left the stream.

"Look every one to his arms and see that you are ready for work!" he added, shortly after.

"Hadn't we better halt and go through inspection?" said the more methodical corporal. "That's the way we do in the army afore a battle!"

"Cuss the army—begging your pardon for the little personality. A man who can't see that his shootin'-irons are capped while he is mounted, isn't much of a soldier to my eye! We've no time to waste in fooling now. We haven't got an hour of daylight left and I don't mean to let the sun set before I've had a wrastle with them chaps ahead of us!"

"All right, sir. When we get to work I reckon you'll find the army can keep up its credit!"

"I've no doubt of it, corporal, and I really beg pardon of you and your comrades for my hasty way of speaking!" said Will, in his blandest tones. "I've been with the army too much not to know its value!"

"It's all right, sir. You're young yet—but you're all man!"

And the corporal looked with some pride on service-stripes on his arm which told he was serving out his third enlistment term.

A little further they sped along as fast as they could drive their animals, and at a turn of the road got a glimpse of the party before them!

Whether they had been seen or not they did not know—nor, feeling as they did, much care.

The glimpse seemed to put new spirit in all the party, and with a glance at every weapon to see it was ready for instant service, forward they dashed.

They were soon within a short half-mile of the Bend, and as they passed a curve in the road they saw the outlaws, a far smaller crowd than they expected, straining every nerve to reach the defile before them.

But their horses seemed about used up. They had been driven too hard in the early part of the day and now were so near "winded" out that they could scarcely be spurred into a trot.

"Forward, men! forward!" shouted Will Cody, "we'll ride the wretches down!"

On—on—not caring if they killed every beast under them if they only overtook the outlaws, dashed Will and his friends.

Closer and closer they drew—they could see Libbie now and see a man lashing her horse to make it keep up with the rest.

"Hurry, boys! hurry! They must not get into the canyon ahead of us. If they do, they'll hold the trail—it's so narrow!" cried Cody, almost mad with his fear of their escape.

"We gain—we gain at every jump. See! they've dropped all their led horses out of the way!" cried young Powell.

The outlaws were now almost up to the defile. They were riding single file, the Indian ahead and the girl last but one, evidently put close to the rear to keep the pursuing party from firing on them for fear of hitting her.

Will Cody would have fired, but he feared they might injure her themselves, and he waited, though they all were in rifle-shot of him now.

The Indian had just reached the entrance of the Bend, and was urging the rest on by gestures, for four or five rods more and all would be around a point of rocks and out of shot, while in a position to check all advance with ease.

Cody could stand it no longer. His pony, the one she had ridden, was strong enough yet for a rush, and risking his own life, he was ready to make it.

Suddenly he saw the horse the girl was riding fall on the road. She was on her feet as soon as it fell and wildly she waved her hands in the air and shrieked:

"Will—dear Will, save me!"

Two outlaws without dismounting clutched at her to drag her along.

In a second her hand was seen to extend, two rapid flashes were seen before a report was heard and the two men fell to the ground. A third turned to seize her, but with a wild cry she sprang right off the bank into the mad, foaming river.

CHAPTER XIII.

RESCUED.

"FIRE—fire on the wretches!" shouted Cody in agony, himself rushing down to the river where he expected to see the bruised and mangled body of the poor girl carried by.

The men sent a volley from their rifles, but the last outlaw had gone beyond the point of rocks, and was safe from their fire—only the deserted horses and the two fallen men in sight.

Cody was down at the water-side in a few seconds, and was astonished, even as he rejoiced, to see the brave girl not only alive, but swimming and striving to reach the shore.

An eddy below a fall over which she plunged, aided her, and Cody, with a wild cry of hope, sprung in to her help.

All this occurred in less time than it takes us to tell it. The stream rushed on with lightning speed, but it no longer held that fair form in its chill embrace. Drawn to the shore—almost perishing, yet with life enough left to weep and laugh hysterically, sweet Libbie was with friends—saved from the outlaws' cruel hands.

"Build a fire—quick—get up a roarer back there out of range from the Bend!" cried Cody. "Here's two ducks stewed in ice-water!"

He was so crazed with joy that he did not know what he said—but he knew that heat was wanted, and that speedily, for the girl and himself shivered as with an ague.

Quickly dry brush and plenty of wood was gathered, and a match applied, and a huge fire threw out its genial warmth and lighted up the gloom of the coming twilight, for night was just upon them.

A few drops from a flask that young Powell carried, helped to restore the poor girl, and some food was soon offered from the well-stored haversack of the corporal, which she did not refuse.

The latter had, with army forethought, posted two sentinels up the road as soon as the fire was lighted, for Will was too much excited at first to think of anything but the wonderful escape of the captured girl.

Now, however, as he began to feel the circulation of his blood once more, he resumed his duty as leader.

"Corporal!" said he, "please take a detail of six men and go as far as where the two wretches lay whom this brave lady shot before she leaped into the stream. Keep under cover as you advance, and have at least two men with guns at a 'ready,' to cover the turn in the road, lest you are fired on from that point. Discover all you can, and return and report promptly!"

The old soldier saluted gravely, wheeled to the right-about, picked his men and started.

Meantime, before the hot blaze, Will Cody dried off, and Libbie, growing easier, told the story of her capture and escape.

The latter showed wonderful courage and presence of mind.

She had seen the approach of Will's party before any but Omaha Charley and the Indian had seemed to notice it. And she hoped and prayed for a rescue, despite the desperate efforts of the outlaws to reach a point where they believed they could make a stand and fight their pursuers off.

She purposely held in her horse as long as she could, but an outlaw lashed it on under command of his leader. Just as they were entering the defile, she saw a deep rut in the road and purposely guided her horse into it, and it staggered and fell.

In a second she was on her feet.

"Drag her along! This is no time for fooling!" shouted Omaha Charley to the two outlaws nearest to her.

Then she uttered the cry which Will heard. The double-barreled pistol which she had felt more than once during the day after she remembered where she had put it, was drawn when the men turned to seize her, and with a quick but deadly aim she sent a ball through the heads of each before a cry could leave their lips.

The outlaw chief, with a bitter curse on his lips, wheeled his horse toward her, and she had no choice—death in the stream, or life if she could live among those boiling surges.

Often in the hot summer-time she had breast the rolling surges of the Atlantic as they broke over the beach near her birth-place, and there she had learned to swim strongly and well.

So without a cry or even a shudder, she cast herself from his outstretched arm into the wild sheet of foaming water—as he thought, to instant destruction.

Bullets were whistling about his form as the outlaw dashed around the corner to rejoin all that were now left of his party—Faro Ben, Lercher and the Indian.

"Where's the girl?" cried Lercher, as he saw that the chief was alone.

"Why in the name of your infernal master don't you ask me where my brave men are?" howled the bandit. "Six of the truest comrades man ever had are gone now, just because I listened to you and Faro Ben. I've a cursed mind to send you both to keep them company! What are you doing, Bear-Claw?"

"Going to keep men from chase us more. Our horses all done up!" cried the Indian, who, gun in hand, crept to the corner of the rocks at the turn, where he could command the approach by the narrow road.

"Bear-Claw is right. If we're to save our own lives, we'll have to make a stand here where we can!" said the outlaw, his passion yielding to present prudence.

And he too dismounted and took ground, his repeating rifle in hand, with the Indian.

"Take the horses onto grass beyond the turn and wait for us," said the outlaw, now addressing Faro Ben. "We two can hold this point if the others want to try the pass. That coward with you is no good anyway!"

"They get girl?" asked the Indian of his

companion, when the other two had gone on as directed.

"No—she shot my two men in the rear ranks, and jumped into the river herself to die!"

"Heap brave, for a squaw! Heap brave!" muttered the Indian. "No live one minute in such water! Rocks cut her all up!"

"Yes—I almost feel sorry for her. She was too pretty to die!" said the outlaw. "I'd begun to like her myself—she stood the run so well and never grumbled or even looked cross! Ha—they have camped away down the road—I see the blaze of a fire!"

"Yes—an' me see more! That girl no drown!" said the Indian. "Look—they hold her up close before fire. Will Cody there, too! He been in river, too—me think!"

"You're right, the girl is saved! God must have helped her—no mortal hand could draw her from that awful torrent. I could shoot her where she stands, but I dare not. Ah—they are posting sentinels up this way. They are cool and wary!"

"Shall me shoot? Can kill a soldier sure!" said the Indian.

"No—Bear-Claw—no! They are too many and we could never get away from all. If they'll let us alone now, I'll wait for revenge another time. And I'll have it, and I'll have that girl and her fortune yet for my share! I've paid enough to get it—six as good men gone as ever jumped into a saddle!"

For a little while the two men watched the camp, saw the girl able to move around and that the pursuers had turned their horses to grass and were making coffee.

"They'll not try to pass here to-night. We must get to a hiding-place before day or they may follow us up!"

"Me show good places. Let horses rest and feed two, three hours—then we go. They no find trail to-morrow!" said the Indian.

"All right—come along!"

The outlaw gloomily strode off to find all that was left of his party and outfit, for he knew he had no chances left there except to kill three or four of his pursuers and get killed himself, for he could not escape till his horses had fed and rested.

And knowing the girl had escaped as by a miracle, he began to form plans connected with her future in which revenge and interest were combined.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE RETURN.

THE corporal was gone twenty or thirty minutes upon the duty designated by Will Cody, the acknowledged leader of the party. Leaving sentinels posted, so as to cover the pass, he returned, saluted and made his report.

"We captured four tired horses, sir—sent them back to grass with ours and then went to the opening of the pass—two men in advance at a present."

"Reaching the spot where the horse this lady had ridden fell, we found it lying there with a broken leg. I put a bayonet through its heart, sir, to end its pain! Two paces beyond two men lay almost side by side, dead. They had been shot square through the head and couldn't have had a kick in them when they fell. I carefully removed the contents of their pockets, sir—into my haversack, which I had emptied for the benefit of the lady, and here it is, sir."

"Then, fearing their carcasses might scare our horses if you move forward in the morning, I caused them to be rolled off the bank into the water. Hope I've done right, sir."

"You have, corporal, and you shall be reported most honorably to your superior officer on our return. As to the contents of your haversack keep them for yourself and comrades!"

"Thank you, sir! I will add, sir, that I have posted sentries to guard your camp, and will see to the reliefs myself."

"You forget nothing, corporal. Your army discipline is a great thing."

"Yes, sir; in cases of emergency it is everything, sir!"

And again saluting, the sergeant went to the fire and got a cup of coffee from the small kettle which one of his men had brought along.

Rations were not very plenty in that camp, and the shelter was only that of leafy trees. Even blankets were a scarcity, only the soldiers had each one and they were utilized for the rescued girl.

Will Cody was in his glory when Libbie, warm and dry, once more sat before the bright camp-fire and talked like her own cheerful self once more.

"Father will not fret much," she said, "for you told him you would rescue me and he knows it will be done!"

"No, little one; I think he knows enough of me to know I'd keep my word! And we'll see him by a little after noon, if my plans do not fail."

"How can we, when your horses are so nearly used up?"

"I shall send you on in the stage, with my chum Frank Powell as an escort. I think it passes here in time to carry you in at least three or four hours before we can make it on the back

trail. They change horses at every station, you know."

"Let me ride in with you, Will, on my own pony. You came for me—take me back. I want no other escort."

"As you please, little one. Now you must get rest. If you do not, you can never stand the journey of to-morrow."

"I will try, dear brother Will."

And she nestled down on the blankets which had been prepared for her, and the brave lad covered her carefully from the night-air.

In a little while her regular breathing told him she was at rest.

Then Will walked over to a tree near by where Frank Powell sat gazing moodily in the fire.

"What are you thinking of, Pard Frank?" asked Cody.

"I'm trying to hate myself, Will!"

"Hate yourself! for what, in the name of all goodness?"

"For falling in love with your sweetheart, Will! I can't help it. It isn't her beauty, though she is the prettiest being I ever saw—it's her courage—her daring. Who but her could or would risk such a terrible death rather than submit to captivity? Who but her would shoot down the outlaws who would have dragged her beyond our reach? Will Cody, I tell you, she is a living angel!"

"All but the wings, pard!" said Cody, laughing. "And now, Frank, understand me. She is not my sweetheart and never will be. And if I were you, I'd be to her, what I am, her true friend without a thought beyond it. I love her as a sister—no more, and now let's drop this and talk of something else!"

"What else?"

"Of this! Quit your musty old school-room and come out on the plains to live. You ride as well as me or better—you're a good shot—take a Pony Express route next to mine, and we'll be together at least once a day all the time. It is a free, wild life, and just what'll make a man of you while you're yet a boy in years, like me!"

"I know it, Will. And my heart pulls hard for the kind of a life you lead. But the old folks at home have set their hearts on my being a great doctor. They've laid out their money freely on me so far, and keep doing so. There's nothing I ask for while I study that I don't get. You know it is so!"

"Yes, Frank. And I suppose you're right. I never did take much to books, anyway! I love a good horse, a rifle that carries where it sights, and a jolly set of boys who know no fear!"

"So do I—but I don't hate books, Will! They're everything to me when I get at them. When I've gone through—graduated, I'll come out here and live, and, maybe, die with you. For I love the free air and wild life as much as you can!"

"We'll shake on that, Pard Frank and I'll wait, for I know you'll come!"

"And I'll try to think of her as you do, Will!" said the young student, pointing to the sleeping girl.

"You're square as they can make a man, Frank—now let's get some sleep if we can. The old corporal is on guard, and we're as safe as we'd be in the best station on the route!"

Side by side with their heads on their saddles, their rifles by their hands, and their feet to the fire—the ground their bed, the sky their canopy, the two friends were soon in the land of dreams.

And thus they lay until the morning star was in sight. The old corporal then made coffee for all hands and the remnant of the food was served out to strengthen them for the ride on the back trail to the first station, where they intended to get a good, square breakfast.

At dawn all the animals were got up, including the captured horses, the best of which Cody now took for his own use, for Libbie was to ride her own pretty pony.

The stock had been in good grass, with water handy, and a whole night's rest had put the animals in fair order for the return.

They were about midway between stations, with a nearly straight road, instead of the crooks and turns of the day before. Therefore it was but a little after sunrise when they rode into the station grounds and received a welcome worthy of the occasion.

For the Pony Express rider going west had told them there on the previous afternoon of what had occurred at the Sweetwater post, and of the abduction of a young lady there, and the pursuit.

But the stations having been avoided by the outlaws, they had not been seen as they passed up.

An hour at the station—their horses and mules well grained, and the party themselves well fed, put them in good trim for making good time on the "home stretch."

The stage did not overtake them till they had gone over half the way home, and its driver and two passengers had a story to tell.

About three miles beyond Devil's Bend, when only a short distance out from their last station, the stage was stopped by three masked men and an Indian, and the passengers eased of the small amount of coin they had on hand.

The mail was not disturbed, and as there was no treasure-box on board, the driver was not called on to hand it over.

But the worst of their trouble was, the six fresh horses before the stage were cut loose from the harness, and with them the robbers struck off at a furious pace in the direction of the Black Hills.

The driver had to foot it back to the station and get fresh horses to come on with, and they were one or two hours late. Even then, however, they would beat Sweetwater before Cody's party, and thus carry the good news ahead to Old Jake and the Station Agent.

Nothing said could persuade Libbie to enjoy the comforts of the stage. She vowed she would stay with those who rescued her until she was once more with her father. Will would not leave his comrades, so the original party rode on as fast as they could in comfort to themselves and their animals.

It was night when they got in, and Old Jake's camp was down by the station now. Great bonfires were set the moment it was known they were there. Every gun from the station and the dug-out blazed a salute, and the fair girl and her rescuers met such an ovation as could hardly be expected even in a crowded settlement.

Old Jake was almost crazy when he clasped Libbie in his arms. He wept and laughed by turns, and then he got mad and vowed that if he saw that villain, Lercher, again, he would skin him alive.

And then, first from Will and next from Libbie, he had to hear a full account of all that had transpired since she was carried off and Will and his brave followers pulled out.

The sergeant was very proud of the record of his detachment and gravely assured the corporal that the general commanding the department should hear of his gallantry.

The corporal and his comrades had solid reasons for rejoicing over their share in the trip.

The contents of his haversack divided among them gave over two hundred dollars in gold to each which had been taken from the bodies of the dead outlaws at the Devil's Bend.

CHAPTER XV.

ICEBERGS.

A LIFE on the ocean was a great novelty to Neville Normand, though in his reading, voyages and adventure at sea had formed a considerable element. Yet, much as he had read, he had no *real* vision, no *full* idea of the grandeur of the ocean until he was tossed about on its great waves in that large ship like a tug-boat on wind-lashed inland waters.

For the first half of the voyage they had fresh but fair winds, and the hearty old captain used to come up on the quarter-deck when he was there, and slapping him on the back, tell him the Boston girls had a tow-line on the ship and were pulling her in ahead of time because there was a handsome bachelor on board.

They were ahead of their usual time when the distance on the log-book bespoke them more than "half seas over" in nautical phrase.

All at once on the fifth day out there came a change. The old captain was seen more often on the "bridge" than on the quarter-deck. The lookouts were doubled below and aloft.

The main alteration was in the temperature of the air, though the wind also changed and became gusty and baffling.

The air grew very cold—thick garments were donned and the tars shook their heads and talked about ice-fields breaking loose up North and coming down in their track.

When Normand saw that the captain scarcely left the deck for his meals and was himself all the time on watch, he realized that there must be danger.

He asked his old valet if ever in his voyages with his lordship ice had come in their way.

"Never but once, sir, and that was when he last came from America after leaving his young wife," replied Jones.

"Tell me about it," said his new master.

"We were in a sailing-ship, sir. Steamers were very scarce then. We were under a full spread of canvas, going 'free,' as sailors say, that is with a fair wind.

"His lordship was then only the Honorable Mr. Edgecombe. He was on deck as you are and very moody and down-hearted. All at once it grew very cold, like it has to-night, and he said to me:

"Jones, go below and get my overcoat. And you can tell the steward to send me up a hot glass of sweetened Jamaica."

"I hurried down and told the steward what was wanted, and got the overcoat and went up with it. My master had put on the overcoat in a minute, and then the steward came with the rum, hot and strong. My master didn't drink much, but what he had he wanted good.

"He had just got the glass to his lips when there was a cry from forward that rung in my ears for a week:

"Ice—ICE close aboard! Dead ahead!"

"The captain was on the quarter-deck, and he shouted:

"Hard up the helm! Tacks and braces all to wear ship!"

"Oh, my gracious, sir—weren't we scared! I mean every man on board, officers and all. For before the ship was half around we could hear the icebergs grinding and crashing—it seemed as if they were right over us, and when we were almost before the wind our ship's bows were in loose ice, and a great berg twice or thrice as high as our masts almost hung over the ship's beam. I could have tossed a biscuit on it, sir!"

"My master never spoke till we were fairly off on another course and the ice was left behind.

"Then he said:

"Jones, this rum is dead cold—go get me a fresh glass hot, with plenty of nutmeg in it."

"If I'd been captain of the ship, I'd have called all hands to prayers to give thanks for the miracle that saved us."

"You had better get my overcoat, Jones—it is getting really cold—I am shivering!" said Mr. Normand, who had listened to his valet with interest.

"And shall I not bring you some hot rum, sir?" asked the valet.

"No, my good man—no. If there is a beverage I particularly detest, it is rum, hot or cold. The scent of it sickens me!"

Night had come on, cloudy and of course dark. The wind had shifted from one point to the other, so all sail was taken in and the ship plunged on under the force of steam only.

The valet came on deck with a heavy overcoat for his master and one for himself.

"I am going forward. I feel as if we were running into some unseen danger!" said Mr. Normand, after he put on the garment.

At that instant, from aloft and below, as in one breath, came the shout:

"Ice! ICE!"

Well it was for that ship, and the three hundred lives on board, that the veteran captain was at his post.

In a second, the bell rung to stop and again to back.

And through his trumpet the captain shouted:

"All hands to their stations!"

The ship trembled from stem to stern under the power of her great engines reversed. And while passengers rushed up from below, the disciplined crew sprung in silence each man to his designated station—some to the boat-falls, others to the pumps—still others to brace and halliard.

A second—it seemed scarcely that—and the ship struck with a dull thud into what was fortunately but a broken spur—"a calf" it was afterward spoken of—of an iceberg which to terror-lighted eyes seemed to tower to the clouds—it was so near and yet so high.

But the backing power was now upon the great hull, and with a rebound the ship broke away from the danger and backed clear of the terrible peril.

But in a few minutes ice was reported on the quarter, then abeam, and it seemed as if the ship was embayed in it.

Cool and composed as if guiding his vessel into some safe and well-known port, the captain remained on the bridge ringing his orders to the engineer to slow, to back and to stop, as he deemed it best from the reports of the watchful lookouts.

All that dark and windy night the ship was almost at a standstill—the ice so near, yet not visible until they were almost on it.

Scarce an eye, perhaps not one, was closed in slumber during the long, long night. Neville Normand paced the deck till morning, talking with the faithful old valet.

At dawn, every one on board could appreciate the courage and skill which had saved the ship. And many a silent prayer—many a grateful word went up to Heaven for the mercy they had experienced.

The great ship was almost surrounded by towering icebergs, and hours went by in backing, going ahead and careful steering through lanes here and there, before the ship got into an open sea and once more headed on her proper course.

Then, and not till then, the old captain, utterly exhausted with long watching and anxiety, gave his trumpet to his first officer, and, wrapped in his sea-cloak, laid down on the bridge and slept.

No one but a commander who feels his responsibility and values the lives in his care can tell the terrible strain, bodily and mental, that accompanies such a strait.

After the danger was all over Neville Normand went to his state-room and slept for hours quietly and in peace.

He argued, before he closed his eyes, in his own mind, that he was spared for a purpose, and he looked forward with hope to what was to come as he went on.

Five days later, without any mishap, the steamship lay moored at her wharf in East Boston, and every passenger, well and hearty, was on shore.

Neville Normand, as soon as his baggage had been inspected by the customs officers, went to the Tremont House, where Jones said his old master always stopped. He did not intend to make an extended stay—he only wished a little rest and to get his "land legs" steady once more before striking out by railroad for the point where his search must begin.

On the hotel register his name was simply entered: "Neville Normand and servant, England."

But his noble bearing and dignified look was sufficient for the experienced clerk to know where to place him.

The best parlor with connecting chamber in the house was assigned to him, and he was asked if he would dine at the *table d'hôte* or have his meals served privately.

Wishing no notoriety, he simply said he wished to fare only as the usual guests did, and sought his chamber for rest.

Not until the next morning did he know that he was "famous," so to speak, and could not remain unknown, for English papers that were brought over in the same ship announced him as heir and executor of the late Lord Glenarvon—one of the wealthiest of English peers.

Then in rapid succession, even before he was up and dressed, came cards from reporters representing the *Times*, *Post* and *Herald*, asking for interviews.

"There are times when an evasion, if not exactly a falsehood, is justifiable!" he said, as he looked in dismay on the cards. "Jones, tell the gentlemen that I am not well—our voyage has been rough on me, and they must excuse me until I am better."

"Then they'll pitch for me, sir—to know all about you—why you came to America and all that!" said Jones. "What shall I say?"

"Say—Jones—that an English servant is under discipline and never knows anything whatever about those he serves, without he is commanded to know and tell. And you have no such orders."

"Yes, sir—I will do my best. But I've seen reporters before. They're more persistent than a tailor's clerk on bill-day!"

"And, Jones—quietly see by what train we can soonest leave for the West, get the price of tickets and report to me."

"Yes, sir."

The dread of being interviewed was so strong in Mr. Normand that when he found he could not leave for the West before four in the afternoon, he ordered his two o'clock dinner to be served privately in his parlor.

Alas for his ignorance. He did not know how keen Yankee reporters could be.

While taking his coffee at three, after dessert, an evening paper was handed to him by a servant.

It contained this announcement:

"A DISTINGUISHED VISITOR.

"There arrived on the Britannia, the Honorable Neville Normand, of Glenarvon Castle, England. He stops at the Tremont. He is joint heir with a daughter of the late Lord Glenarvon of the immense estates and properties of that nobleman, amounting to over ten million pounds sterling. The daughter is said to be in America, and our distinguished visitor has probably crossed the ocean to notify her of the death of her noble father and her vast inheritance. We hope his stay with us may be long and pleasant, and that he may become interested in the rapid development of our republic.

"The English papers speak very highly of the gentleman, who is descended in a direct line from King William of Normandy."

"The last item is news to me, but worthy of a reporter's inventive brain!" cried Mr. Normand, surprised over the whole article. "Jones, order a carriage, get our baggage on, and we will be off to the cars before they know it. Take my purse and pay the bill below!"

CHAPTER XVI.

COERCION.

WHEN Omaha Charley found that his pursuers, satisfied apparently with the rescue of the girl and the damage done in the death of men and loss of horses on his side, did not offer to push beyond the "Devil's Bend," he hurried forward with the Indian and rejoined Faro Ben and Lercher, who had halted at the first spot where the horses could get grass. Of these they had but four left. Even the tough old pack-mule had given out and been abandoned, while the pseudo "trapper" was the last man killed.

The Indian, who knew the country thoroughly, turned the party back from the road through a ravine to a place close by where, finding better grass and water, they could also build a fire and cook some of the antelope-meat.

Little did they think that the shot which procured that meat had really led to their discomfort, for Cody would not have pushed the pursuit so fiercely had he not seen the Indian, and they might have gained the security of the "Pass" unmolested.

Omaha Charley was stern and silent when he rejoined the two men. Faro Ben, though not a coward, in a physical sense, as Lercher really was, knew it to be prudence to respect the grim silence of the outlaw until the latter chose to break it.

Lercher was terribly frightened. Visions of continued pursuit, and the fate of the rest of the party left behind, filled his mind. He regretted in his very soul that he ever left the comforts of civilization to follow a girl whom Providence seemed to protect.

Only the Indian in that crowd was happy. The death of others was nothing to him—or if anything, pleasure. He had plenty of good

meat on hand, and he went to cooking it as unconcernedly as if there was not an enemy within a thousand miles.

The first slice, well-browned, but juicy, he handed to Omaha Charley on a forked stick. The outlaw was his ideal of a "great brave," and was to be treated with respect and deference.

"Thank you, Bear-Claw—the meat is good, and I am hungry!" said the outlaw.

Bear-Claw smiled grimly. He was rewarded.

A word of praise from the stern leader was better than gold to him.

Turning to Lercher and Faro Ben, the Indian pointed to the raw meat hanging near on a branch and said:

"There meat—s'pose you hungry, cook and eat. Me cook for cap'n and myself!"

And he suited his action to his words, for a slice hardly half-cooked went rapidly down his own ravenous throat.

Then he cooked another tenderloin steak for the leader, which was received with another kind word.

Lercher and Faro Ben were too hungry to stand on ceremony, and they cut and cooked for themselves.

A hearty supper, washed down with some cold spring water, seemed to put the chief in a better humor, for when the rest had eaten all they wanted, he said to the Indian:

"Cook up all your meat. We have got to travel and travel fast for a few days, and will have no time to hunt or cook. My plans are laid!"

"Horses much tired—no travel very fast for good while till get some rest!" said the Indian.

"I'll have six fresh ones in the early part of to-morrow, and these will be a good deal rested and well filled up before we need to push them!"

"Six fresh horses? I wonder where they'll come from?" said Lercher, in a low tone, addressing Faro Ben.

The outlaw heard him, and said with a sneer:

"You'll help to steal them!"

"Me—STEAL?" cried the Englishman, in dismay.

"Yes—you steal! You tried to kidnap a girl and made a botched piece of work of it. Now I'll give you a lesson on horses and you may improve! In your cause I've lost all my band, and until I can replace them with men suited to my line of business I shall use you and Ben there as apprentices!"

"Sir—I protest, and I will not—"

"Say one word more—utter another objection and this will close your protestations!" cried the outlaw, his eyes flashing angrily, as he half drew his huge knife from its sheath. "You are not worth wasting powder on!"

The Englishman paled under the significant threat and choked down his reply. His looks told his misery.

After Omaha Charley laid down for a nap, leaving the Indian to guard the camp and horses till he woke to relieve him, the Englishman made up his mind to get away and to desert the party.

Seeing that Bear-Claw was busy cooking the residue of the antelope-meat, he thought he could creep away unseen, for Faro Ben lay snoring with his feet toward the fire.

He did creep off a few yards, but the ear of the Indian detected the movement.

"Come back, lay down, or me cut your throat!" hissed the latter.

Lercher trembled, came back and laid down by the fire. But he was too unhappy to sleep. He wished then he had never come west of Chicago, or engaged in an enterprise in which he was sinking all his money and risking his life.

At midnight the outlaw woke and relieved the Indian in his watch. The latter told him of Lercher's attempt to escape, and the reply came like a chill of icy wind to the coward heart of the wakeful man by the fire.

"If he tries it on me, I'll break a leg and then let you burn him at the stake!"

"Me have his scalp first 'fore fire spoil him!" said Bear-Claw, as he "laid him down to sleep" without saying any prayers.

At dawn Omaha Charley woke all hands, for Lercher from sheer exhaustion fell asleep toward morning, and after they had taken a hearty meal of cooked meat unfolded his plan.

Producing black masks he told the party of his intention to stop the stage which would be due at a point not far from the change station where he meant to get his work in, in about two hours.

They were to "clean out the passengers," and take the fresh horses from the stage while he covered the work with his repeating-rifle.

"And if either of you flinch or falter in your part of the work I'll shoot you down!" he added, after he had given full instructions how they should act.

Lercher shuddered, but he knew death, instant death would follow the least sign of shrinking, and he took the mask handed him, only too glad to cover his pallid face.

Two hours later and the well-laid plan had succeeded to perfection. Lercher, much as he dreaded it, had, with his own hand, searched the passengers and taken their money and watches. Then he had aided in taking the horses from the coach.

"Now, brother road-agents, we'll skip!" cried Omaha Charley, with exultation, as on four of the fresh horses, leading the rest, they galloped toward the distant Black Hills.

An hour or more they rode furiously forward, the Indian, with unerring judgment, leading the band, when, suddenly and dangerously near, right in their front, was heard the clear notes of a cavalry bugle sounding the order "Boots and saddles!"

"Gosh all hemlock! United States cavalry!" cried the outlaw. "Halt!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE OUTLAWS' FLIGHT.

THE most fortunate thing for the outlaws in the world just then was that they were passing through a swampy bit of rich grass.

"Dismount and let the horses feed!" was the second order—"but stand to bridle every man!"

For while the horses fed they would not neigh, as horses almost always will when they hear strange horses moving near them.*

Leaving his own horse in charge of the watchful half-breed, touching his rifle as he looked significantly at Lercher, the outlaw said:

"Speak one word above your breath and you die, no matter what comes!"

Then he hurried noiselessly forward to the crest of a low, wooded ridge not fifty yards away.

From it, looking down in a valley, he saw a full squadron of United States cavalry, which had just broken camp, mounting for the march. They were not a quarter of a mile away, and he could hear every order given by the commanding officer, after the men were in saddle.

"Into column by fours—right!"

The chief breathed a sigh of relief, for the column headed off southwest, when the next order came sharp and clear:

"Close order! Forward! Trot!"

He listened to the clatter of sabers against boots, stirrups and spurs—watched the fast-receding troop as it trotted steadily off, until it faded in the distance and was out of sight.

"We've luck with us!" he said, as he remounted his horse. "If we had ridden to the top of that ridge we would now either be dead or captured. Sixty carbines of eight hundred yards' range would have rung our death-knell!"

"Would they shoot prisoners if we surrendered?" asked Lercher, in a tremulous tone.

"Surrender or capture means State's prison for life to highway robbers! Would you prefer that to a friendly bullet through your heart, my gallant tenderfoot? You've helped to rob a United States mail-coach, Mr. Lercher, and shooting would be a mercy to what you'll get if ever they lay hands on you!"

"They daren't touch me. I'm a British subject!" he muttered.

"Bosh! They'd hang you to get rid of trouble the minute you told 'em that, and serve you right!"

"I wish I had never come into the blasted country," groaned Lercher.

"That'll do! Don't you cuss the country, or you'll get six feet of it to rest on till you rot. Mount now—we'll make seventy-five or eighty miles before we camp!"

With the horses rested for over an hour and refreshed with soft green grass, they now galloped swiftly forward, taking a direction by order of Omaha Charley that carried them nearly parallel with the stage route, but a long way back of it.

For, full of expedients and never disheartened, the bandit had already made up his mind what to do and where to go. He knew where or nearly where he could strike the haunts of a large band of outlaws, horse-thieves and road-agents, under a noted murderer and robber known as "One-Eyed Clare."

He had met their leader at a noted "fence" and "boozing ken" in Omaha, and been more than once offered the second place in the band if he would join it with his smaller party. And he thought now it would be better to be second with plenty of men behind, than first with but one really good follower—the Indian. For Faro Ben as a card sharp was A1, but in the saddle and on the road scarcely worth his salt.

The Englishman he did not count at all, and cared not how soon he provoked a shot or a blow which would make him the sole possessor of an underground lot of the "blasted country" about his own length.

The Indian, who had cast off all allegiance to his late employer, had been told enough by the outlaw of his wishes to take the best and safest course to carry them out.

All day they rode on—changing horses whenever they stopped to water, and snatching a bite of cold meat every time they had a chance, to keep up their own strength.

The country over which they rode was full of game, and time after time they had to swerve in their route to avoid huge herds of buffalo and gangs of elk which they did not wish to alarm

* In 1862, while out on a solitary scout in Virginia, hidden in a pine thicket, watching Confederate cavalry going by, the neighing of the writer's horse nearly cost him his life.

lest they might attract roving bands of Sioux upon their trail.

For hostile Indians love scalps too well to pause to inquire of a small party they come across whether they be friend or foe.

By the time the sun was sinking in the west they had covered, since their start, full seventy-five or eighty miles. A small grove of thick trees, at the foot of a hill whence ran a bright little stream offered good concealment for a camp, and grass grew rich and fresh along the brookside.

"We'll stop here—our horses have done too well for us to push them beyond their strength!" said the bandit leader, as he glanced over the ground.

"Best place for camp me see in hundred years! Look. Brook all full fish!"

And Bear-Claw pointed to the crystal stream, which was literally "alive" with fish swimming in its shallow reaches.

In a little while the horses were unsaddled and staked out, for there was not a sign of red-man or white to be seen in any direction, and they felt safe from danger of surprise.

Then, just inside the thicket, far enough for perfect cover, a fire of small dry wood, which gave out no smoke, or scarcely any, was kindled.

Tin cups half-full of water were set near, and spare rations of coffee issued to make the supper palatable.

Fish, caught readily by hand in the shallows, were dressed and stuck before the fire on slender skewers to roast. These, with cold antelope-meat, made a meal relished as much as if it had been "square," and served up in hotel style.

Then giving the Indian the first watch as before to look out for the stock and camp, Omaha Charley advised the other two to sleep off their fatigue. For on the next day he meant to make as great a distance as they had already ridden—if not more.

"Please," said Mr. Lercher, now very humble and respectful—"please, sir, is it any harm to ask where we're going?"

"Not a bit o' harm, and you'll find out as soon as you get there!" was the soothing reply.

CHAPTER XVIII.

IN CAMP.

A NIGHT of rest and quiet, after some hours of rejoicing and congratulations, gave the men who had been on the chase with Will Cody new life.

The station was all gayety next day, and young Powell having volunteered to ride Will's route out and back on the Pony Express, the young hero had a chance to hold a long and serious consultation with Old Jake and Libbie as to their future course.

The old man was persistent in his intention to go on to California to gather up means to make his intended trip to England, that his young darling might have what he termed "her rights."

Cody could not change his iron will by any argument about the danger of the route as already proven.

Libbie would not take part in the council. Her "father," she said, had always acted on his own judgment—she would depend on it now.

All that Will could get the old man to promise was that he would wait until a body of troops which were reported below as on the march to Utah arrived, when he could then move forward in their company if the commanding officer gave permission.

Will had many friends in the army and felt no doubts but that he would get the desired consent. And thus he felt that, at least as far as Utah, his "little sister" would be protected from harm. He did not know then, and few did, that a young and lovely girl had better be left to the tender mercies of a band of heathen savages than be exposed to the ravenous eyes of the human wolves in that Territory, who never spared a helpless lamb if once it fell under their lecherous gaze.

The agent at the station was happy. He had escaped the murderous attack by which three of his men had fallen—he had recovered all his stampeded stock and become satisfied that the band led by the bogus "Route Inspector" was so nearly wiped out and scattered that he was free from future peril, at least from that source.

That night the advance guard of the troops ordered to Utah reached the station. It was a battalion of the old Sixth Cavalry, under a gallant officer, Colonel Sumner, with whom young Cody had a slight but favorable acquaintance.

The foot troops and baggage and provision trains were a long way back—it would take them nearly two weeks to get up—but the cavalry, with horses in not the best of order, were to go on to Laramie, there to turn out the stock for recuperation while the men were put under drill as infantry, for there were many fresh recruits among them and cavalry in the hills had often to act dismounted as infantry.

Will introduced the brave and courteous cavalry leader to Old Jake and his daughter, and without disclosing the history of the latter, told of her recent abduction and the perils he feared might yet beset the old man on his journey.

"I'll write to General Harney, who is with the command, and ask him to let the old man

join the wagon-train. He has a heart, though a trifle rough in his way, and he'll see you safe as far as he goes!"

Thankfully this offer was listened to, and now Will felt much easier in his mind. He little dreamed what terrible experiences his poor little protégée must pass through before she could reach her "rights," if indeed she ever lived to reach them.

Neither that even then, when he believed her enemies dead or too demoralized to ever attempt a second abduction, could he know a bolder and far more dangerous plot was forming against her peace and happiness.

Some say it is well the future is hidden from our eyes. I say no! Walking in the dark, how can we know where and how to step and avoid the peril which unseen is in our path?

The cavalry camped along the stream above and below the station and made things lively for the night, though they were under such discipline that when "taps" were sounded, all was still except the tramping and snorting of horses at their picket-ropes and the measured tread of the sentinels "walking post."

Officers and men, well-sheltered in their tents, enjoyed the comforts of an easy march, and though every precaution was taken that is required in the rear presence of an enemy, they had luxuries which are never known in the hot dangers of active warfare.

Tents, provisions, stores and ammunition were packed on mules when they moved, for on the plains and in the mountains wagons are too slow for anything but infantry.

The next day Will Cody reported for duty on his pony route, and Frank Powell was once more his companion as he dashed swiftly over the trail.

The young Express Rider knew that he would see Libbie every time he ran in until the infantry train came up, and it was a comfort to him to know she was safe—a joy to her to see and talk to the one who had proved so good and true to her.

Old Jake alone was fretful. He had little trade, "wasn't makin' his bread," he said, "let alone butter or lasses to eat with it." But he was a man of his word, and would not go on until the troops arrived who would see him, as he thought, through the worst part of his journey.

CHAPTER XIX.

A NIGHT ALARM.

On the second day out from "Devil's Bend," Omaha Charley made even better time than on the first. He heard no "bugle-note of alarm," saw nothing to check his speed, and the party only paused to water and change horses. The animals all seemed to have got used to the gait, a steady gallop, and took to it easily and without much urging.

When the sun was yet a couple of hours high, Bear-Claw swerved a little from line, and killing a nice young buffalo cow, cut out the best rib and tenderloin pieces and the tongue for their next supper and breakfast.

The pace was lessened a little for him to come up, for it was nearly time to choose a campground, and no one of the party knew the lay of the land and its water-courses but he.

For a camp without wood and water is worse than none at all. *Verbum sap.*: I've been there.

A little before dark, just in time to get their horses to grass, well-picketed out, for they had repeatedly crossed Indian signs, they reached a stream that ran into the North Fork of the Platte and made camp in a grove of willow and cottonwood.

It was not such a camp as they had the night before. Neither did they feel so secure. But they could do no better, and with as small a fire as they could utilize in cooking their meat and making coffee they had to be content.

Their best horses were kept under saddle, and from the moment it grew dark two men were kept on guard.

One remained outside with the horses, the other stood nearer the camp-fire ready to alarm the two who were allowed to sleep.

Omaha Charley took Faro Ben for his watch—Bear-Claw, to his disgust, had to put up with the Englishman.

By turns the two watches got supper, eating voraciously, for such exercise as they had been taking makes men as hungry as bears. Then dividing the watch, it was agreed that the outlaw leader should, with his mate, remain on guard till midnight.

For reasons better known afterward, Bear-Claw wanted the morning-watch. And it was well he got it.

There was no actual alarm during the time Omaha Charley kept watch. But he noticed that the horses seemed very uneasy. He laid it to the howling of prairie-wolves which he heard several times very near the camp.

He told Bear-Claw of this when the latter came on guard.

"Me get a wolf-scalp 'fore day! You see!" said the Indian, and he touched the knife in his belt.

There was no moon except just before day, for it was in the last quarter. Nothing to do any good except a pale glimmer of stars from a hazy sky.

Tired—very tired—Omaha Charley and Faro Ben lay down by the embers of the camp-fire which Bear-Claw insisted should not be rekindled, and they were asleep almost as soon as they touched the ground.

"You stay there by timber. Me see to horses!" said Bear-Claw, when they took post.

The Englishman was too big a coward to feel sleepy. He felt as if there was danger in the air. The horses seemed to grow more and more restless, and he would jump every time one of them gave a snort. He dared not move away from the tree by which he had been stationed.

By and by the long-drawn howl of a wolf was heard very near the horses.

It was answered by a chorus of howls that seemed not far away.

The morning-star had just come above the eastern horizon when the Englishman saw some animal—he thought it was a wolf—creeping slowly up toward the line of horses. He thought the Indian did not see it, and he opened his mouth to speak, but at that instant he saw Bear-Claw glide along like a serpent just to the rear of the horses.

Then, as the supposed wolf was within a few feet of the nearest horse, Bear-Claw with a bound, was upon it, and a fearful yell rung through the air as his gleaming knife rose and fell in the dim light.

"Hurry, call cap'n—get horses into bush!" cried the brave Indian, and he uttered also a terrible yell as he shook a gory scalp in the air.

Yells loud and long filled the air in the direction where howling wolves had been heard, and every man sprung to get the horses under cover before the fight began, for they knew by what they heard that a band of Sioux was close upon them, ready for fight.

"They no get horses—I kill the brave that try it. Now they wait and see how strong we are before they fight!" said the half-breed.

He was right. Though the Indians uttered horrible yells, they made no direct attack until they could see where the white men were and how their chances stood.

This gave the outlaw leader time to put his horses in a hollow slough, just back of his position and to secure them there out of range of fire from the front.

The Indian had chosen the camp with an eye to defense. It was in a sharp bend of the stream, and right in the rear was a dense, swampy and impassable thicket.

Only in front could an enemy reach them. The stream and thicket flanked and gave them protection in the rear.

When day dawned fairly they saw, mounted and with spears shaking in the air, a band of full thirty warriors.

"Sioux! Ogallalas!" cried Bear-Claw. "Fight heap hard! Begin shoot now—keep up fire hot!"

The Indians were about four hundred yards distant—closely massed, and seemed about to charge.

"Every man aim for a head, fire when I do, and keep it up as they come!" cried the outlaw, leveling his Colt's rifle at the mass.

"Fire away, and hold your revolvers for the last, if we don't beat them back. Fire deliberate, lose not a shot!"

His own rifle rung out while he spoke, and as the red fiends came yelling on, shot after shot, a regular continuous fusillade met them, and warriors fell in such numbers that when almost up to the grove all that were left wheeled in terror and sped beyond rifle-range.

The continuous fire from the repeating-rifles deceived them as to the number of the hidden foe, for the outlaw and his men kept cover while they poured in their shower of lead.

Fifteen Indians, and several dead and wounded horses lay stretched on the plain.

"Me get scalps enough to make bridle soon!" muttered the half-breed, while all hastened to reload their rifles.

The Sioux were astounded. They had expected to stampede and capture the horses and then to make short work with the party. They did not even know their number now. But they knew that half their own warriors were dead or dying.

Bear-Claw wanted to go out and finish the wounded and to scalp all the dead. But this Omaha Charley would not permit. He feared some warrior would have strength enough left to put a spear or bullet through the brave fellow, and he was determined they should not have the chance.

Whenever an Indian was seen to show any indication of life a well-aimed bullet was sent to quiet him, and soon all were still.

The surviving Indians were seen grouped as if in consultation. They had dismounted. Suddenly a faint smoke was seen beginning to rise.

"Hell! Curse! They make smoke to call more come help 'em! Me give 'em all fire they want—more too!" cried Bear-Claw, and he snatched a brand from the smoldering camp-fire and rushed out where the grass was long and dry on the prairie.

Bounding from point to point he fired the prairie in a dozen places.

Then as the flame shot high in air the Indians beyond saw their peril, and springing on their ponies dashed away at the hight of their speed.

Their only hope was to outstrip that deadly element, and it must have been faint, for it rolled on a great wall of fire, hiding them from sight in a few seconds—a grand and a fearful thing to look upon.

"How ever are we to get away from here? The fire runs right on our course!" said Omaha Charley, addressing the Indian.

"Go when night comes on. Ground cool by then—no burn horses' feet. Travel by stars. Me no had make fire, we never get away from here! Them Indian watch, make smoke, call fifty, maybe hundred more. They use us all up!"

"You were right, Bear-Claw. You are a great brave. Wise and strong of heart! Your courage and skill have saved all of our lives. Wear this for me!"

And the outlaw took his watch and a gold cable-chain as large as his finger that hung over his neck and threw it over Bear-Claw's neck.

"Me keep it till I die—then it go with me in ground!" said the Indian.

The fire had swept along until all that could be seen was bare blackened ground for miles on miles, and where the dead Indians and horses had lain only charred lumps of flesh and bone remained.

"Me lose 'em scalps!" said Bear-Claw, mournfully, as he pointed to the ghastly remains.

"Got one—he chief, too! See the eagle-feather!" he added, with pride, as he looked at that token at the time the Indian tried to reach and stampede the horses.

The party, who in their desperate plight had all acted well, even to Lercher, now got their horses to water and grass where the fire had not reached the former, and cooked and ate their breakfast.

It was a late meal, but safety made it palatable.

CHAPTER XX.

SHARPS.

THE journey by rail, continuing day and night, was very fatiguing to Neville Normand, for in that day the luxuries of travel were not what they are now—hotel cars were not in use, and the few "sleepers" were very primitive. Neither was the speed as great as at present.

At Chicago the traveler and his faithful valet made their first stop. His memoranda enabled him to find the hotel where the agent had died, and there they inquired for an Englishman named Eugene Lercher, who had written the news which informed his lordship where and how his agent had died and also sent in a bill for expenses incurred and services rendered, which had been duly acknowledged and paid.

And here they first learned that this man Lercher had deceived his lordship in one point, if not more.

The agent, well supplied with funds, had paid his own way to the very last and had even put more than enough money in the hands of the landlord to pay all funeral expenses and nearly a hundred dollars over.

This Lercher had tried to claim, but the landlord, like most of his class in great cities—I mean of the better class—was strictly honest and held it for the heirs and rightful claimants, if such could be found.

"Where is this Lercher? Is he still in Chicago, where law can reach him and justice be meted out?" asked Mr. Normand, when this proof of the man's crookedness was made apparent.

He had drawn over one thousand dollars from his lordship and had forged the agent's name to an order for the money.

"He left Chicago for Omaha some weeks ago!" said the landlord.

"Then to Omaha, where I was going at any rate, I will follow him!" said the young Englishman.

And by the very next train he set out, believing he was on a double track, that of a villain as well as the young lady whom it was his special duty to find, calculating to go by rail as far as railroads went—by stage the rest of the way.

Advised by the landlord, he made the acquaintance of the King of American Detectives—Pinkerton, and confiding to him the rascality of Lercher and also his other business, secured the services of a brave man thoroughly posted in his profession, who agreed for a liberal salary to go and remain with him until his entire mission was accomplished.

This gave Mr. Normand a great advantage. He could not be deceived or imposed upon in the presence of Duncan Young, the man selected, for he knew every city, hamlet and settlement in the Great West even across to San Francisco, for he had seen many years of constant service under his great leader—known the wide world over for his skill, perseverance and daring.

After engaging the gentlemanly detective, as quiet as he was dangerous to criminals, Mr. Normand asked him how long it would take him to get ready.

"About fifteen minutes, sir," was the answer. "I have but to send for a large traveling valise containing some clothing and two or three disguises. We detectives are always armed and ready for work at a moment's notice!"

And actually, within the time named the officer was in Mr. Normand's hired carriage on the way to his hotel.

An hour later the three—Normand, his valet, and the detective were on their route, ticketed through to Omaha.

On the journey through to Omaha nothing occurred to Mr. Normand and his party worth noticing except a little incident that happened before they were fairly out of sight of Chicago.

Mr. Normand, who at times enjoyed a good cigar, went forward to the smoking-car to "fumigate," and had scarcely taken a seat when a very flashily-dressed man approached him and said:

"Beg pardon for speakin' to a stranger, sir; but me and two other gents is wantin' a game o' poker—just for beans, you see, an' we want a fourth hand. Won't you j'ine?"

Mr. Normand was about to decline, but he was saved the trouble. Duncan Young was at his side.

Pulling the bell-rope to stop the cars, he seized the would-be card-player by the collar and dragging him as he would a sick puppy to the nearest platform, he kicked the fellow off on the ground.

At the same time the other two sharps and confidence men wisely ran to the next platform and got off, just as the conductor came up to see why the cars were stopped.

"I just lifted Dude Cooper and his gang out of good company, Mr. Wilmont," said the detective, addressing the conductor.

"Thank you, Mr. Young. You saved me the trouble, for I have orders to permit no loose characters on the train?" was the conductor's reply, as he rung for the train to go ahead again.

"If those fellows had got you to play, sir—at first it would have been for beans, as that fellow said. You and your partner would have had wonderful luck, with cards stacked into your hands—then cash would have taken the place of beans, if they succeeded in leading you on. Then luck would turn, and they'd skin you out of every dollar if they could, and if they failed in that, pick your pockets. I know them and their ways, and I play bluff on them every time they cross my path."

"They'd like to kill you, would they not?"

"Yes—if they dared. But liars and thieves are always cowards."

CHAPTER XXI.

SMOKE.

THE ground cooled off before night, for just an hour or so previous to sunset a sharp shower of rain fell, much to the joy of Omaha Charley. The horses had fed well, and rested all day, so, when led out after the men had supped heartily, they were ready for a long and sharp run.

The rain had cleared the sky, the stars shone brightly, and Bear-Claw had no trouble in shaping his course.

Steadily through the night they pushed forward, seldom breaking their gait, for the air was so cool the horses needed no water.

Three times only did they shift horses. When day dawned, Bear-Claw said they had come over sixty miles, and pointing to a low range of hills ahead said:

"There where you find One-Eye Clare. He got heap big cave—hide men and horses too."

"How long will it take us to reach the cave?" asked the outlaw.

"We rest now, feed horses, eat some ourself say stay three hour, then get there long before night," was the reply.

"Well, we will rest—there is a good place by that willow-spring."

"Yes; me camp here plenty time when me hunt and trap! Good water, good grass—not much wood—heap buffalo-chip, all same!"

The party halted, staked out the horses for they had left the line of fire at the last stream they crossed two hours before and were now in rich, nice prairie.

The horses were unsaddled, and after the men breakfasted, groomed as well as they could be with such appliances as they had.

For, as Omaha Charley said, now making no secret of his destination, he was not going into the camp of a brother outlaw in bad shape.

Three hours passed away, and they were in trim to push forward.

Omaha Charley had taken extra pains to have his men and arms, like the horses, look their best, and he told Lercher to hold up his head and act like a man if he didn't want to "go under."

The unhappy subject of Queen Victoria would rather have been somewhere else, but, if he had only known it, he was far more out of danger there than he would have been in Omaha.

Riding briskly on after they started, the outlaw and his Indian guide side by side, they soon entered a far more rough and hard country for travel.

Rocky ridges, tree-covered and hard to ride over made their progress slow, yet the hill or rather mountain before them which contained the cave Bear-Claw had told about rose rapidly to view.

Suddenly to their right, not more than a mile or two, a puff of smoke rose in the air—such as would come from a gun—yet they heard no report.

Further on toward the hill a minute later another cloud of smoke rose, lasting scarce a second, and then seen no more.

"What does that mean, Indian signals?" asked the outlaw.

"No," said Bear-Claw. "Them smoke-flash, made by white men for signal. They wet handful powder, burn him—he smoke quick and all gone. Indian make big smoke, last long, when he make sign!"

"Then they know strangers are coming into their territory!" said Charley.

"Yes—me s'pose all same. Not more three, four mile to cave! You see them four tree—pine over there way?"

"Yes!"

"When we get there—me ride slow and look out. Me meet men close there. Old One-Eye keep scout out, and they shoot soon as speak!"

"Had I not better hoist a handkerchief for a white flag?"

"No—then they think you go for fool 'em. Ride right on like you no afraid! See—there go more smoke-flash way up on hill. That at mouth of cave. They're all eyes."

"Close up, boys—no open order now!" said Omaha Charley to Faro Ben and Lercher, who rather lagged behind.

They closed up, for the leader carried his rifle across his lap ready for instant use.

They now entered a ravine, deep and narrow, with many turns, riding along a well-marked trail.

"Twenty men well armed could defy a small army in such a pass!" said Omaha Charley, as they rode on.

"Yes—heap place better yet afore you get to cave! Ride on, we get there to supper!"

Forward rapidly they dashed, now up a steep hill then down into a dark and shadowy dell, until they were very near the trees that had been pointed out by Bear-Claw.

Rising the hill, they were nearly abreast of the first tree. Before them rose a wall of rock which looked as if it had been built by human hands, though the rocks were too large to have been handled except by machinery.

Suddenly over this wall a row of shining gun-barrels were seen bearing full on the advancing party. But not a man was visible behind them.

"Halt—throw up your hands, strangers, and say your prayers!" shouted a stern voice.

Instantly every horse was brought to a stand and every hand went up, even to those of the bold outlaw.

But his went up in a peculiar way.

One hand lifted high had the forefinger pointing to the sky—the other open with the palm held upward, was held across the owner's throat.

"Who gave you that signal, stranger?" cried the same stern voice.

"One-Eyed Clare, in Den Quantrell's boozing ken at Omaha. Tell him, or send him word, Omaha Charley is here, with some culls as crooked as rams' horns!"

"Advance! You are safe! It is Charley himself!" cried another voice, shrill and sharp—it almost gave an earache to hear it.

And what had looked like solid rock was drawn away—a skillfully-painted barrier.

Before them stood twenty men armed to the teeth with knives, pistols and guns, while a slender man of middle age, showing but one eye, the other shaded with a green patch, stepped forward and shook hands with Charley.

This man was the plainest dressed of all, but in his thin, close-compressed lips, his eagle-bill nose, his one flashing eye, you saw a leader of men.

His belt was literally studded with revolvers, and a bowie-knife fully eighteen inches long hung where his right hand rested on its hilt as he spoke.

"You and your pards are welcome, Charley. Dismount. My men will take good care of your stock. Dismount and enter 'Salvation Hall.' I call it that, because a man once there finds none but friends and can defy his foes. Ah—I see you have Bear-Claw with you. Him and me are old friends. He saved my life once and I don't forget it!"

"He saved all our lives yesterday, and I'll never forget it!" said Charley.

"Who have you else here? Ah, one is Faro Ben. When did he take to the road?"

"Only lately. But he learns fast and is a fair shot. The other man hails from England—he isn't much account, but he has got his hand in and he'd swing if I didn't keep him along."

"All's O. K. I reckon you're hungry. The hotel gong will boom in half an hour. Meantime we'll swap news. I heard from Omaha today—one of my scouts came in and brought all the late papers. I haven't had 'em looked over yet—but we'll see to that after supper."

While talking, the one-eyed chief led the way into an immense cavern which glittered with gorgeous stalactites from dome to foundation.

Lighted by several glowing fires near the sides, the smoke rising through holes above, it sparkled as if lined with diamonds.

Long tables were set about in various parts, but one was curtained over by a kind of canopy and seats were scattered near it. On the table lay a dozen or more of newspapers.

"Take seats and make yourselves at home!" said the chief.

All sat down, and Lercher took up a newspaper.

The next instant he dropped it, and shrieked out wildly:

"They're on our trail! THEY'RE ON OUR TRAIL!"

"Who, you durned galoot?" yelled One-Eyed Clare.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE OUTLAW BAND.

"Speak! Who is on our trail? Hesitate and off goes the top of your head!" cried the one-eyed outlaw.

His shrill voice rung through the great cavern and fifty armed men sprung to their feet and hurried forward.

Eugene Lercher never had stood in more deadly peril. The hand of Clare, the outlaw, was on a pistol; his one eye fairly shot fire.

"I did not say your trail! It is my trail I mean! I saw it in the paper. Oh, don't, don't shoot! I'm not ready to die!"

And the coward dropped on his knees and held his hands up while he wept pitifully.

"Back to your places, every man! I'll see what this galoot means!" cried the leader, addressing his excited followers.

As they at once went back to the various positions from whence they had rushed, the outlaw turned to Lercher and said:

"Get up, you poltroon! Get up and tell me and Charley here what has scared you so. Who is on your trail?"

"A man from England, sir—he is over after the girl and he is after me, too. It is all in the paper, sir—he has hired a detective and— Oh, mercy! I wish I was dead!"

"Well, you can die easy here—but the first thing you've got to do is to read what you are talking about. Come, spit it out or I may get mad and then something will drop!"

Lercher got on his feet, reached for the Chicago paper, and in a tremulous voice read this paragraph:

"A GREAT HEIRESS!

PINKERTON ON THE TRACK.

A ROMANCE IN REAL LIFE.

"By late Boston papers we read of the arrival in that city of the Honorable Neville Normand from Glenarvon Castle, one of the last scions of a proud race, a descendant of King William of Normandy."

"Those papers contained a synopsis of the will of the late Lord Glenarvon, formerly Honorable Walter Edgecombe—in which the distinguished visitor becomes co-heir with a daughter of the deceased, now in the United States, to an estate and properties amounting to over twenty million pounds sterling—in our money over one hundred millions of dollars—one of the largest fortunes in England."

"An agent of his lordship, who came on to find the young lady who shares in this vast fortune, recently died in Chicago, and it is now surmised by foul means, since a fellow-countryman, who pretended to be his friend, forged his name to an order on his lordship for a large amount of money, which he got after the agent's death, immediately after which he left for some point west of this city."

"The Honorable Mr. Normand, who is now in this city, is in search of the lady, who is also in the West. He has put detectives on the trail of the scoundrel, one Eugene Lercher by name, and it is to be hoped he will soon be apprehended and brought to justice."

"Mr. Normand has got a trace of the lady, and will doubtless soon be in communication with her. She is said to be young and very beautiful, well-educated and accomplished."

"We wish the honorable and distinguished gentleman success in his mission and a pleasant sojourn in this country."

And you are Mr. Eugene Lercher?" said the one-eyed outlaw, fairly piercing the trembling coward with his glance.

"Yes—yes! You will not give me up? Oh, don't—don't—for they'll hang an innocent man!"

"Bah! We don't have any innocent men here! We'd hang 'em if we found 'em out! There isn't a galoot in my gang that hasn't killed his man—some of 'em can count twenty on their death-roll. Killin' a man is nothin'. It is the getting caught that spoils a fellow's game. But say—did you p'ison that agent that died?"

"On my soul I didn't. He died a natural death!"

"Maybe you choked him when he was weak like and couldn't squeak."

"No—no—I didn't kill him. On my soul, I didn't!"

"Swear by something else. Sheep haven't any souls!" cried Omaha Charley. "You're in a box, and the best way for you to get out of it is to take a dose of lead. You wear pistols—blow your own brains out, if you have any."

"I don't want to die yet. I'm an awful sinner, and I'm not ready!"

"Then go to prayin' before fear takes you off, I say. Clare—he'll make a good chaplain, if you want one. He's on the repent, you see."

"Don't have any use for such cattle here. He'd make a good cook, if he isn't used to handlin' p'ison!"

"I never did. I'll stay and cook—do any—"

thing, if you'll only keep me and not give me up!" groaned the unhappy man.

"We'll see how you behave yourself. Here, Croppy—take this chap in your mess, and see to him. If he offers to go outside without I know it, cut his throat."

A man whose ears had both been cut off close to his head approached in obedience to this order, and told Lercher to go with him.

Meekly the Englishman obeyed, and was soon seated near a fire in a far corner of the great hall, talking to his new companion, "Croppy."

And now One-Eyed Clare turned to Omaha Charley.

"Do you know anything about these parties, pard?" he asked.

"You bet I do! That's why I'm here. I had that girl in my arms—before me on my horse, only four days ago, and she is just as pretty as a rose, and for courage—she'd shame any galoot in this whole crowd! She shot two of my best men dead in their tracks, and would have shot me if she'd had another load in her shootin' iron. Then when I was reachin' for her she jumped right into the surging river at Devil's Bend, where you wouldn't think a strong man could live a minute, and swam to a big crowd of her friends who had just opened fire on me from below. Oh, she is a scorcher. I'll squeal if she isn't! I've lost six men on her account already."

"And given her up?"

"Not much, I haven't! I'll have her and her fortune now or die! Do you hear me?"

"I reckon! Do you know where she is now?"

"Yes—on the Overland route, and not more than two or three days from here. I want your help—good men and true, and I'll share the biggest kind of a *divvy* with you and them, after she is my lawful wife, which she *shall* be by fair means or foul, and then I'll get her money!"

"It's a big pile, if all in the paper is true!"

"It must be. *Papers* never lie—at least I've heard that said. Why, that miserable galoot, Lercher, was after her and her money."

"'Twas him that put me on the trail—he has money, and he offered to pay me well—now, I'll play my own game and pay myself!"

"So—he has money, has he? Let Croppy only find it out, and he'll skin him so quick he'll not feel it! But, pard Charley, you'll have to work quick and sharp, if others—her friends—are close on the track of the girl!"

"I mean to. If you'll let me have a good band of brave, sharp boys, with good horses, I'll strike out after her to-morrow. I'll keep Bear-Claw and Faro Ben with me. The Indian is all grit and the best guide on the plains. And he likes me. Ben is fair as far as he goes, and like whisky will improve as he grows older."

"All right, pard Charley. I'll pick out the best men I can spare. It is a big game and must be played sharp. How many men do you want?"

"Twenty ought to be enough. We may have to clean out a station. And they've had a taste of me and they'll be apt to fight!"

"You shall have thirty. Do you know I've over eighty in my band now? Every galoot that kills his man and has the cops after him strikes for "Salvation Hall." I've more men than I can find work for. I've sent parties clear over into Utah to give 'em work and keep 'em busy. I run a regular Express from here to Omaha, pard, I do, by hominy! I've horses, too, more than I can feed without sendin' them off a long way. I'll fit you out bully! I know you're clean grit—all sand and no hacks in the cuttin' edge. And—There goes the first gong—we'll have supper on in just ten minutes!"

As he spoke a gong, like those in use in many hotels, rung out a noisy peal.

And from the various fires men were seen hastening to place food on the tables, and in a little while steam rose from a hundred savory dishes.

That of the chief soon smoked under a load of elk-steaks, buffalo-ribs, warm bread, hot tea and coffee, and other luxuries hardly to be expected so far out on the plains.

"You'll get square meals here, pard Charley, while I stay. My Omaha Express, as I call it, comes handy when I want anything the hunters can't bring in."

"So I see! This kind o' living will spoil me, Clare. I'm not used to it!"

"Don't fret. It's good to have a change in diet once in a while. I go down to the settlements after *hash* sometimes. But I always come back hungry. Pile in, old boy—grub is plenty. I've ten men who do nothin' but hunt and fish. And they're good at it. But game has got scarce close by—they have to range for it!"

For a time there was a regular second edition of Babel in the vast room. Men who are silent at other times talk when they are eating, and the clatter of sixty or seventy knives and forks was not to be sneezed at so far as noise was concerned.

The cooks, in white caps, were seen flitting to and fro from fire to table, filling up dishes as fast as emptied, for no man had cause to leave a table while he was hungry.

After supper, the guards were sent out, reliefs came in, and then all over the place groups could be seen—some playing cards, others telling stories, all seeking the pastime that pleased them best.

CHAPTER XXIII.

PREPARATIONS.

COVERED with dust, tired dreadfully, Mr. Neville Normand arrived in Omaha. After leaving the rail a stage ride followed, most novel to him, because the horses were driven at a gallop and not a trot. He was ferried across the muddy Missouri to the city in *embryo*, for not until it had a railroad linking it to the two oceans and a bridge across the great river, did Omaha really "spread itself" and become a city worthy of the name.

Arriving with his valet and Mr. Duncan Young, he took rooms at the best hotel, and after a bath and a few hours' rest felt like entering upon his work.

The detective, used to all kinds of traveling, was afoot as soon as he was dusted off.

In less than three hours he learned that Geoffrey Lercher, after hanging about the town some weeks, frequenting gambling dens, and saloons, and spending money freely, had left on the Overland route for California, going on horseback, having a half-breed Indian guide and a gambling desperado named Faro Ben in his company.

"So much for him!" said Mr. Young. "He has gone by his own name, and seemed not to fear pursuit. But now the papers have got him in, he'll be warned and will sail under some other cognomen. Those reporters are death to our business."

"Have you heard anything of the other party—the old man and the young lady?" asked Mr. Normand.

"Yes, sir—I was just reaching that point. Mr. Jacob Limbertoes, a shrewd and sagacious Yankee he seems to be, purchased a trading outfit, partly in Council Bluffs, and partly here, nearly two months ago. It was of such goods as poor settlers, hunters, trappers and Indians need. He bought a few horses and mules—enough to carry his truck, two tents and a good stock of provisions."

"The young lady, supposed to be his daughter, was not much seen, remaining in her rooms while the old man made his purchases."

"After getting his outfit complete, the old man, accompanied only by his daughter, started on the Overland route, naming his destination as California, but intending to trade at every profitable point all the way over."

"Your report is most complete and very satisfactory, Mr. Young. I am only astonished to think you have learned so much in so short a time."

"It is our business, Mr. Normand," replied the detective.

"Well understood and better developed," said his employer. "Now our next move is westward. How shall we go?"

"There are two ways. One is by stage-coach—going on night and day, no stops except to change horses and get your meals. No time to make inquiries either."

"That will not do. What is the other way?"

"To procure our own horses and a pack-mule and go independent of public conveyance. You can ride, of course?"

"Yes—when quite young I was famous as a hunter—have topped many a thick-set hedge and five-barred gate."

"Then we need three stout, fast horses, a good strong young mule that will carry what baggage we take—as little as we can get along with."

"We will sleep and eat at the stage stations. But as a precaution, blankets, rubber and woolen should be carried in case we have at any time to camp."

"And arms. There are hostile Indians on the route. In addition to the pistols we have now—we each want a good repeating rifle—I like Colt's the best."

"Purchase all, Mr. Young. You are the best judge of just what we need. Buy everything and send me the bills here. I will cash all, bearing your signature!"

"All right, sir. Some of the things I can buy to-night—arms, ammunition, blankets and cooking-utensils. For we want to make our own coffee and may need some other things. The animals require daylight for examination and trial. Care and judgment to get some good beasts with speed and endurance is required. In truth I wish you would aid me, sir, and choose your own saddle-horse. I know a dealer who is reputed to be fair and square in his business. He supplies army officers largely and ought to have some good stock on hand!"

"All right, Mr. Young, I will go with you to the horse-mart in the morning. And—for your other purchases—take this money, pay for them and have the articles sent here!"

A roll of bills accompanied the remark.

The detective bowed and hurried off.

"What men these Americans are!" said Mr. Normand to his valet. "While my countrymen think—these men act."

"Yes, sir, they are all *go!*" was the answer of the old man. "We will have to leave the trunks here if we go West on horseback!"

"Yes—you can go out and purchase two large, strong valises, like that belonging to Mr. Young. They can be packed on the back of a mule and will hold all we need to carry. I hope

our journey will soon end, for if this old man is trading along, he cannot have gone very far!"

"I hope not, sir. I long to see my young lady, sir. Her mother was very, very beautiful and so gentle. It almost broke my heart to see his lordship leave her—but he got so angry. He was crazed just then, I think, for he made a vow if she bore him a girl instead of a boy, he never, never would look on her face again."

"It was a girl, and sir, you know all the rest!"

"Yes, Jones, yes!" was the answer, as his young master relapsed into a thoughtful, silent mood.

The good old servant said no more then, but went out to look for such valises as his master had ordered.

That evening, three Colt's repeating-rifles, with leathern suspension-belts, a good supply of caps and cartridges—six army holster revolvers for use in the saddle, three roomy, easy saddles—bridles, lariats for picketing, a hatchet, coffee-kettle, frying-pan and three sets of cups, tin plates, common knives, forks and spoons came in for Mr. Normand's inspection. Also six woolen and three rubber blankets, army pattern, and a single sheet shelter tent, which would be useful in covering baggage, if nothing more, and yet was light and not cumbersome.

"We are fitted for a regular campaign!" said Mr. Normand, when the detective returned.

"Nothing, sir, but what we actually need. I have seen the horse-trader, and he says he has three or four very fine, active horses—well-broken. They were ordered for army use—but he can replace them. He has also a trained pack-mule that has seen service. So all we have to do in the morning is to pick our animals, pack and be off. We ought to do that early enough to go our forty or fifty miles before night!"

"Mr. Young, the more I see of you Americans, the more I see to admire. I have read the lives of some of your pioneers—Colonel Crockett, General Houston, Kit Carson and others, but I never fairly understood your *go-ahead-iveness* until now!"

"Thank you, sir—you only see a scant sample in me!"

The next morning, at an early hour, the horse-mart was visited and three splendid animals closely inspected, tried and purchased. They were a cross between the Black Morgan and the mustang, and combined speed with fine bottom, besides being easy feeders, good on grass where grain could not be had. The mule, lean, large and bony, was used to packs, and warranted to drive or follow when once on the road.

Before ten o'clock, leaving his trunks safely stored, Mr. Normand, his valet and the detective "loped" out of town, taking the stage route up the Platte river for their yet unknown destination.

Well-mounted, thoroughly armed and equipped they dashed off in hopeful spirit.

CHAPTER XXIV.

OFF ON A RAID.

WHEN it was known in "Salvation Hall" that Omaha Charley, known among all "crossmen" as the bravest of the brave, had been named second in command of the band of One-eyed Clare, there was loud rejoicing in the crowd.

For his accession to their ranks meant *work*. And work meant *booty*. And booty was what they lived for, were ready to risk life to get.

When it became known that he was going at once to organize an expedition the whole band wanted to volunteer, such was their belief in his courage and daring enterprise. They did not know or care where he was going—it was enough that he was to lead.

But he wanted only picked men, and Clare, who knew them best, was asked to make the selection.

He called from the ranks, when all were assembled, twenty-eight young and desperate men—every one a good rider and a dead shot. The most of them would go forth with "forfeit lives" in their hands, *outlaws* for many of whom rewards stood out—rewards for their bodies, "dead or alive."

Bear-Claw and Faro Ben made up the complement of thirty men under the leader.

When Eugene Lercher found that he was to be left behind he went almost crazy.

In the first place, "Croppy" made a mere scullion of him, and put him to washing dishes and carrying off slops.

In the next he feared for his life, for the men soon learned that he was an arrant coward, and kicked him out of their way as they would a mangy cur whenever he passed before them.

Last and far from least he had heard Omaha Charley tell Clare that he would get the girl and her fortune. This would be death to every hope which Lercher had formed, and for which he had risked everything. If he could be with the party something *might* turn up in his favor—through treachery, or in some other way he might yet come out first best.

So, with tears in his eyes, he begged to go with the party, and finally offered Omaha Charley two thousand dollars down—money then in coin in a belt on his person, for the privilege.

It was an unlucky *"bid"* for him. He had been overheard by Croppy, who having been

told to keep an eye on him, never let him out of sight.

And when after Omaha Charley had scornfully told him he would have no cowards with him, the unhappy fellow went back to the further end of the cavern, "Croppy" very quietly took him into a dark niche and relieved him of every dollar. He dared not resist, for the point of a knife touched his breast, and he took off his belt and laid it at Croppy's feet when told to do so.

"I'll tell the chief!" gasped Lercher, when they got out in the light again.

"If you do I'll cut your ears off as close as mine, and then there'll be two 'Croppies' to laugh at."

So Lercher had to choke down his grief and mourn his loss without a sympathizer.

All that day was spent in seeing horses new shod—fitting saddles and picket-ropes, fixing arms and ammunition, and in getting a large supply of cooked provisions to carry along—each man to have a week's supply in haversack or saddle-bags.

One extra horse carried stores—tobacco, sugar, coffee and the cooking kit. Another was packed with extra ammunition. And this was all the baggage.

Every man had a blanket and a rubber coat strapped behind his saddle.

The shoeing was done in a farrier's shop inside one portion of the vast cave. And one of the men who went with the expedition was specially selected because he was a skilled farrier, and could reset and fasten loose shoes. Everything about the one-eyed outlaw's establishment was on a grand scale and nothing left wanting which he could command.

As the day was given to preparation, a good part of the night was given to a genial jollification, a kindly "send-off" to the new lieutenant and his party.

It was not a spree in the usual sense of the word. There was a right royal supper, a small allowance of wine and liquor drank, songs sung and speeches made.

But no man ever got drunk in Salvation Hall. It would have been a sick day for one who did. For it was against the rules of the bandit chief, and woe to him who broke his laws. He held no courts—listened to no counsel; he made his laws and himself punished those, and they were few, who broke them.

By a little after midnight every man except the guards was at rest, and all of those going with Omaha Charley in the morning were off guard.

Before dawn the first gong sounded—at break of day the second was heard and all hands went to breakfast.

At sunrise the expeditionists were ready. Mounted, they formed line in front of the cavern and were inspected, man and horse, arms and accouterments, by their new leader.

Clare walked along the line also, and there was an exultant light in his eye when he said:

"Charley, they're all right and fit to fight for a kingdom!"

"You're right, pard, and I'll do my best with 'em!" cried the former, as he sprung on a horse just given him by Clare, a large stallion, black as night and full of wild vigor. "And Satan, here, shall win a gold-lined stall before he returns."

He patted the arched neck of the splendid horse as he spoke.

"By twos—right into column—forward!" he cried, and the men wheeled from line into a column with a touch of the rein and spur, and followed him as he rode proudly down the ravine which led into the open country.

"Bear-Claw," said he to his guide, who rode next to him, "we head for Sweetwater Station. Make the best route you can and strike a good camp to-night—nice cover, wood and water—with grass. I shall not hurry—I want men and horses fresh."

"Me go forty mile—easy. Hit Little Loup—good camp!" was the Indian's brief reply.

And he spurred his horse a rod in advance of the column.

Omaha Charley looked back with pride on his strong following. Lawless on the road, respecting no man beyond their own leaders, they were not to trifle with.

The outlaw, as he rode on, studied out a plan for his future action.

He would get as near to Sweetwater as he could without being discovered, send in a scout and find if the girl was there—if so, sweep boldly in, clean out the station and carry her off.

Once she was in his possession, he was undecided just where to go, for he disliked to risk her in Salvation Hall, where there were so many men and not one woman, and he wanted, if he could, to win her by kindness to listen to him rather than to use any forcible means to gain her hand and fortune. For on these his mind was set. He already knew she had courage and a strong will, but he knew so little of woman nature that he thought captivity with but one way to freedom would break down her courage and her will also.

To his men he said nothing of his destination or his objects. Only Bear-Claw knew what course he was making, though they saw it tend-

ed toward the stage route on which most of them had made many a raid. They were used to silence in a leader, for One-Eyed Clare never gave his men the least knowledge of where a blow would fall until it was struck. Hence his universal success in all his raids.

Leaving the band on the march, we must go back to Salvation Hall to see into a matter of deep import to our story.

CHAPTER XXV.

A NEAT SCHEME.

"MISTER CROPPY, please, sir, may I ask you a question?"

"Yes," said Croppy, for he was not used to having a handle put before the only name he was known by in Salvation Hall.

And he rather felt sorry for the man who spoke to him, Eugene Lercher, though he had robbed him of every dollar. For Lercher looked so sick at heart and was so utterly friendless there, he didn't know but the poor tenderfoot meant to commit suicide and had a "last message" to send to some one.

"Are you very rich, Mr. Croppy?"

"That's a curious question. Does it make you think I'm very poor because I borrowed that money-belt o' yours?"

"Oh, no, sir—oh, no. I'm not thinking of that money—you're welcome to it. I've plenty more where that came from."

"What! Where is it? Tell me, my dear pard, and I'll promote you from dish-washer to second cook!"

"You will not tell anybody?"

"Not a chicken!"

"And you'll help me to get it if I give you half?"

"How much is there?"

"Twenty thousand dollars, Mr. Croppy."

"My Jeremiah! You don't mean it!"

"I do, and I can prove it!"

"Prove it and I'm your man!"

"Can you read?"

"You bet, and spell and do sums up to double three. I went to school when I was a kid—I did!"

"Then read what is on the outside of that book."

Mr. Croppy made slow work, spelled out the name, and at last read:

"Goodrich Bank of Council Bluffs—in account with E. Lercher."

"That's it!" said Lercher. "Now if you'll look inside you'll see credited to me twenty-five thousand dollars. And then over on the next page I'm debtor for five thousand drawn out. The money you got is all I had left out of that five thousand. But there's twenty thousand in the bank yet which I can draw out if you'll help me. And if you will, ten thousand of it is yours!"

Croppy looked inside the bank-book long and carefully.

"Yes," said he, at last—"it's all there, just as you say—hunkies-doree, sure enough! But how can I help you?"

"I'm almost afraid to tell you, Mr. Croppy!"

"Sho! You needn't be afraid o' me. I know I'm a bit rough now an' then, but it's because I've had hard luck, been unfortun'ate in my life and went to the bad when it wasn't my fault! I was a gentleman, once—a regular sport, had fine horses and dogs, and went to the races and all that."

Mr. Croppy sighed. It sounded like the last exhausted breath of a broken-down hand-organ.

"I knew you'd seen better days, sir, the moment I set eyes on you. And I said so to myself. And there's no reason why you should not see them again. And if I ever get a chance to help you to it, Mr. Croppy, I'll do it!"

"Seein' the way we both are fixed just now, you're werry kind!" said Croppy, dubiously. "But you didn't tell me how I could get half that money."

"You'll not expose me?"

"No; by Jeremiah, I won't. That was my father's name—mine, too, once, and when I say by Jeremiah, I MEAN it!"

"Anywhere away from here, where there's a mail or a bank, I can draw my balance out of that bank. I've the certificate of deposit and blank checks. Couldn't you and I—"

"Hush—go back with me where no one can see our faces while we talk!"

Mr. Lercher felt encouraged and went with Croppy into the gloomy niche where he lost his money-belt.

"Now—speak low and I'll listen!"

"Couldn't you and me slip off, Mr. Croppy, on a dark night, when it rained, so we couldn't be tracked, and get to the settlements or some city? Then, with this money, you and me could go to England where I could give you fifty thousand more, for my folks are rich, and you and me could live like gentlemen at ease till we died of old age. Hear me out—I'd represent that you was an American, and had been captured by Indians and cruelly mutilated before you was rescued!"

Mr. Croppy listened. That last hit was very happy on Lercher's part. Mr. Croppy hesitated. Hesitation in some cases is as good as assent.

At last the earless man drew a long breath and whispered:

"Do you know what kind o' fate a deserter from this gang meets?"

"No—I have no idea—what is it?"

"He is burned alive!"

"But not till they catch him. If I had a two hours' start from here, even on foot, they'd never get me if it rained to hide my tracks."

"You'd have to go on foot. There's guards with the horses night and day."

"I've a compass. I know which way the great road lays. Arms lay around loose everywhere. There's meat enough left over and wasted every meal to last two men a week. And in half that time we could be beyond pursuit."

"It's tempting. If I did listen to you, wouldn't you go five thousand better on your bid? If you're so rich across the water you'll not need much to get there."

"I'll do it, Mr. Croppy—I'd give more if I could."

"And that girl I heard our boss and Omaha Charley talk about. Have you given her up?"

"Oh, yes—that is if Omaha Charley gets her. If he didn't, we might chip in on that, too!"

"I'll think of it. Go to your work like you was contented, and whistle or sing, just as if you felt at home. After dinner we'll have another talk. I'll go out now and look around—you come out in three or four minutes, so no one will see we've been alone together!"

"He takes the bait. He bites—HE BITES!" muttered Lercher the instant Croppy was gone.

"Oh, if I can but escape and reach the line in time to head off Omaha Charley in his plans, I'd be willing almost to die. I'll risk all to do it. If I must die, I'll die like a man, and not stay here to be kicked to death."

He acted and looked like another man when he went from the gloomy corner out into the light to do his work.

He did whistle and sing, and he could have danced, but he feared some of the outlaws would say he had been drinking.

He washed up his dishes, reset the table, and got all ready for dinner when the cook should bring it on.

"Go to the spring by the front o' the cave and get a bucket o' water cold and fresh. Do you hear, tenderfoot?" cried Croppy, putting on authority purposely.

"Yes, sir," meekly replied Lercher, and he took the water-pail to obey the order.

"Get out o' my way, crow's meat—what do you run in front o' your betters for?" cried an outlaw, giving him a kick as he passed on.

"Kick away, boys; I'll get callous by and by, and it won't hurt!" said Lercher, with a laugh.

"Thunder! There's some fun in you, after all!" said the amazed outlaw, who expected to see him wince or make a complaint.

"Yes, sir—when I come back don't kick the bucket!"

"Hal hal That's good. If I did kick the bucket, 'twould be a grave affair, wouldn't it? I'll not lift a foot to you again except tenderly!" said the ruffian, laughing heartily.

"Wit will make friends where gloom breeds enemies," was the whispered thought of Lercher as he went to get the water.

A large fountain of water, clear as crystal and almost as cold as ice, boiled up within a rod of the entrance to the cave. All the water used inside came from the spring. The cave itself was dry.

Lercher cast a hurried glance at the sky as he dipped up the water. It looked dark and threatening.

"Rain is coming—rain is surely coming!" he gasped as he hurried back.

He was passing where the one-eyed chief was talking to one of the guards who had just come in, and he heard the latter say:

"Omaha Charley will have to camp early today; a regular bu'ster of a storm is looming up in the west!"

"All the better—all the better if Croppy stands fire," sighed Lercher, fearful only that he would not.

The dinner-gongs gave their signal soon after Lercher carried in the water and for an hour eating was the order of the day.

Prairie chickens, wild turkey, elk steaks and buffalo ribs, with soft bread, hard crackers and corn-dodgers formed the bill of fare, and as "Croppy" was captain of the mess he made the cooks heap his table, for he said he never was so hungry in his life.

Lercher, who acted as waiter, caught his eye as he said this and the look gave him yet stronger hope.

When dinner was over, Croppy purposely got into a heated argument with one of the men at another table and Lercher had a chance which he availed himself of to carry back quite a lot of meat and bread to a place where he could and did hide it easily.

Lercher supposed and rightly that a chance was given for him to do this.

After eating his own dinner, and he ate enough to last, he washed up the dishes as usual and kept on whistling and singing as if he had never known grief.

After a while Croppy got through with his "snarl" as he called it and came near enough

to Lercher to speak in a low tone unheard by the others:

"A storm is going to shake everything up before long. Look out and keep up your game till after supper. If I warn you and the coast is clear, be ready!"

Lercher nodded, but never broke off whistling. All went at supper-time, about as it did at dinner.

By ten o'clock nearly every man in the cave was abed and asleep, making up for lost time the night before.

Just about eleven—Lercher, who had no thought of sleep—heard Croppy approach. He pointed to the door.

"It rains cats and dogs—now is the time," he said.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE TWO DESERTERS.

IN an instant Lercher sprang from his blanket, which was spread on the ground near his table. He trembled as if struck with a chill. He knew if he was caught in an attempt to leave, he would die on the spot. He had been told that an awful fate awaited those who were caught after escape, or "desertion," Croppy had mildly termed it.

He had a choice. He knew that he would die if he stayed, for a lingering misery was before him—in desperation he might turn on his persecutors, and then—why, they would shoot him down.

"I'll risk all now—I'll go!" he said, mentally, as he filled every pocket with the food he had hidden.

Croppy did the same, and handed him a revolver wrapped in a piece of rubber blanket. Also a bowie-knife. Croppy had pistols in his belt and a rubber coat over all.

"I'll go first, carrying the water-pail as an excuse if any one wakes. The fires are down—most of the lights burn low. Creep after me—make not the slightest noise, or we are lost!"

Croppy whispered these words, then took up the water-pail and started. He had been a burglar, and his tread could not be heard when he was two yards from Lercher. The beat of his own heart sounded like thunder in the ears of the latter.

Croppy was out of sight in the gloom before Lercher got courage to start. Then, bent down till his hands could touch the ground, he crept toward the great entrance.

Croppy was there, waiting for him. He had a gun in his hand. He had taken it from a place near, where he had concealed it, earlier.

"Come on," he whispered. "Keep hold of my hand. The guards will all be under cover or asleep. It don't rain—it POURS! They know nothing would stir in such a storm. Hear the wind howl—now, COME!"

He led the way out into the utter darkness. But he seemed to take his bearings at the start and knew just where to go. He did not go down the main ravine by which Omaha Charley came and went.

He turned short to the east, felt his way along the cliff that faced the great cavern and struck a narrow footpath that led away from the stronghold.

"When we get to the open—we must keep square before the wind. It comes from the west and we must go due east a long way, then we can trend south for the road!"

Croppy spoke louder now. He had to, to be heard, for wind and rain pouring and shrieking made an awful turmoil.

Lercher had no shelter-coat—he had brought his blanket, but it was soaked before they had gone a mile. It was so heavy he would have cast it off, but it saved the provisions. Stumbling on—running where they could, the two fugitives made time and distance tell.

They knew they would be missed at breakfast-time, and pursuit would be swift. But such a rain would wash away every track. Even dogs kept in the cavern-stables could not scent a trace.

Never stopping even to get breath—uttering scarce a word—along they sped, for when day came Croppy said they must hide. He had kept a trail thus far—they could feel with their feet when they left it, and thus held their course. But he said they must leave that before day and get off where there were thickets in the foot-hills they were getting to.

Day came, sooner than they wanted it to. But so dense was the pouring rain they could not see a hundred yards on any course. Great torrents rushed through the gulches along which they hurried, looking for some good place of concealment, for their speed had nearly broke them down.

By compass now they bore up so as to get a course for the main stage-road. Not before they got there could they feel anything like safety from pursuit.

Croppy, who dared not travel by day until a long way from the cave, said it would take them at least another night, if they could travel their best, to get anywhere near it. He knew the lay of the land well—he had hunted over it.

Nearly two hours after day, Croppy said they must stop, for men would be out in every direction. They came to a rocky ledge, and careful

not to break even a twig on some bushes through which they had to creep, they got into a crevice and under a shelving ledge out of the rain.

Drenched from head to foot as he was, Lercher had kept warm while running, but now he shook with cold.

His teeth chattered and he felt as if he would give the world, if it was his, for a good glowing fire.

Croppy, dry under his rubber coat, was more comfortable. He saw how his companion suffered and drew a small bottle of spirits from one of his capacious pockets.

"Drink hearty. You need it. I don't!" he said, as he drew the cork.

Lercher drank off half the contents of the bottle at a gulp.

Reaction came and he felt better. He drew his blanket close about him and soon steam rose, showing there was animal heat under it.

"My bread is all mush and the meat like a rag!" said Lercher. "We'll be out of provisions."

"No—mine are dry—we can eat the meat you have first, even if it is soaked. We'll do that when we're hungry and keep mine."

"I'm too tired to be hungry!" said Lercher.

"Don't talk of being tired yet, when we're only just started. We've many a hard mile ahead of us if we get safe away. Hark—I thought I heard a dog!"

"No—it was wind. I heard the same sound before," said Lercher, whose chill had passed away.

"We might as well get some sleep now if we can. For when night comes we've got to light out. We'll take turns at it—for one must keep watch and listen."

"You sleep—I'll watch. I don't feel a bit sleepy," said Lercher. "As to noise—the rain and wind would drown out the report of a cannon if it was fired a half-mile off. I never saw such a storm."

"It has been everything to us," said Croppy, as he crawled in as far as he could get out of the wind and curled down to sleep.

In a little while he was snoring.

And Lercher sat up in his steaming blanket and listened. How the wind howled. At times it almost seemed as if he heard hoarse voices—yet it was the rise and fall of the noisy blast.

The hole or cleft into which they had crept did not extend back over ten or twelve feet—but it was so low that it was quite dark. He could only sit upright in it. They had crept in on their hands and knees.

By and by, growing warm, Lercher felt as if his clothes were drying from the natural heat of his body. Then he felt sleepy. But he dared not wake Croppy. He might get ugly if he did, and he wanted to keep friendly till he got where a friend was not so badly needed.

The rain still continued, but it was not so heavy. The wind blew in gusts—fearfully hard at times, then slackened up. That the storm was abating in some degree was sure.

Lercher would much rather have seen it continue, for he thought no one would search for them in the storm—it would be so useless. But if the storm broke—what then? He shuddered as he thought, if captured, what his fate would be. "Burned alive!" That was what Croppy had told him would be the punishment.

For hours Croppy slept, and never turned or moved. When at last he woke—Lercher was asleep. His face was turned toward the entrance—he had watched as long as he could, and dropped off on duty.

"Poor devil—he couldn't help it!" muttered Croppy.

Creeping to the entrance, he peered out from the cave.

"The storm is beginning to slack—by night it will be over, I fear. I wish 'twould hold twenty-four hours more—we'd be out o' range then!"

It was still so thick he could not see more than a few hundred yards—not so far as the trail they had left. So he could not tell if pursuers were abroad and near.

In about an hour Lercher woke.

"Mercy on me—I must have dropped asleep!" said he.

"Yes—you've had a two hours' nap—no harm has come of it, so don't worry!" said Croppy, in a kind tone. "I woke up just after you dropped off, I reckon, and have been lookin' out. I'm afraid we're going to have a clear night of it!"

"Can't we travel better if we do?" asked Lercher.

"Yes—but if parties are out, layin' for us, they can see better too!"

"Oh! I didn't think of that!"

"We've got to think of everything on this lay, cully. Aren't you hungry?"

"No—but I can eat, for I'm weak and awful tired!"

"Well, take a bite and then go to sleep. I'll watch. We can't move out o' here before night anyway."

Some meat, pretty well soaked, and some biscuit that had been hard, but was not now, were brought from Lercher's pocket, and the two men breakfasted.

Then Lercher rolled up in his blanket and went to sleep.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A SAFE SHELTER.

OMAHA CHARLEY and his band had not been on their route two hours when Bear-Claw turned to the leader and said:

"We must ride fast to make good camp. Big storm coming!"

The outlaw looked at the sky and all around the horizon. He saw scarcely a cloud in sight. Overhead a light network of fleece—"a mackerel sky," sailors would call it.

"A storm? I reckon you're out, Bear-Claw. I see no sign," said the leader.

"Um! See 'em crow? They fly high, 'most out o' sight. They know when storm come. They go west. Storm there, now, it hit us 'fore night!"

The Indian was right. No more certain sign of a storm could be seen than the one he pointed out. And even the direction from which it would come was signified by the sign, crows flying high and stormward.

Omaha Charley said no more to the guide. His sagacity was unanswerable.

"Close up, men, and use your spurs!" he cried, and the column went on at a gallop.

Pausing when they reached a water-course some two hours later, to breathe their horses and give them drink, the men got a verification of the warning given by the half-breed.

The sky began to fleck all over with those little gray clouds. And far away in the west a black line slowly rose above the horizon.

"How far to the place where we can camp?" asked the leader, for they were on open prairie.

"See woods now! Look! Ride fast—we there, make nice camp 'fore storm break!"

The Indian pointed to a dim line of trees apparently ten or twelve miles ahead.

"Forward!" cried the outlaw, giving Satan the rein, for the proud horse needed no spur.

In silence, at a gallop, they swept along. Rapidly the tree line rose, and they knew they could reach the dense grove in time, though to the west the black storm-cloud rose higher and higher.

As they approached the trees, Bear-Claw looked annoyed. Omaha Charley asked what was the matter.

"Me see 'um smoke over there!"

He pointed toward the grove.

"I see none!" said the outlaw, looking earnestly at the wood, now not over a mile away.

"Me did—it has gone out. No matter—we got no other place for camp. Better fight men, than storm!"

And he rode on, swerving not from his course, nor drawing rein.

The grove was not large, though dense. They could see clear prairie to the right and to the left.

They were within half a mile, when riding at full speed, a small band of Indians were seen to leave the western end of the grove, riding madly off to the southwest.

"Ha! Me know me see smoke. Them Sioux. Few men, they 'fraid—they run and leave camp! Storm not so bad as our guns—ho! ho!"

The Indians—a dozen or thereabouts—were almost out of sight when the band of outlaws entered the grove. A camp-fire with its brands scattered, a deer hung on a tree, dressed and partially cut up, with some half-cooked venison still hanging to toasting-sticks, told how suddenly the late occupants of the grove had departed.

They had evidently prepared for the storm. Heaps of dry wood had been gathered and lay near the deserted fire.

A "wicky-up"—a kind of bough shelter capable of holding twelve or fifteen men—was erected. When covered with their buffalo-ropes it would keep off the heaviest rain and shelter them and their food and ammunition.

"Make another like him! Then cover with rubber coats we all dry by, by!" said the Indian, pointing to the shelter already there.

A flash of lightning and the distant boom of thunder told the outlaws they had no time to spare.

A strong picket line for the horses, where the trees were thickest, was put up and the horses fastened there.

Then while some of the men hurried to cut prairie-grass to bring to the horses, others put up a second shelter and strengthened the first. Over the bough roofs they laid their rubber coats and cut heavy poles and lashed them over all, to hold down the improvised roof.

More wood was gathered and the fire replenished under the great trees between the two shelters.

All this had just been finished and night was falling, when all at once—with no other warning than a fearful flash of vivid lightning and a despairing peal of thunder—the rain came down in a deluge.

Only by frequent additions of fuel and the aid of the strong wind was the camp-fire kept burning.

The outlaws listened to the howling blast—saw the rain come down almost in sheets, and laughed. They were dry and comfortable. The foresight of the red-man and the labor of the white enabled them to defy the storm which they could scarcely have outlived on the prairie.

Their horses shivered and stamped at the picket-line, but the trees partially broke the storm, and they fed as if they were tired and hungry.

Although in a storm like that no one could be abroad, yet for discipline's sake, Omaha Charley set a guard—one for camp, and one for the horses, as soon as the men had supper.

He appointed one man as officer of the guard for half the night—the other half he would keep himself.

This was to see the guard kept and reliefs called.

All night long, as we already know, the storm raged with fearful violence. In the morning it did not slacken and Omaha Charley could not break camp.

He did not like it. But to show discontent before his men would make them moody, so he appeared as cheerful as if the sun was shining and he on the march.

A couple of full rations of corn had been brought on each horse. One was served out to each animal at noon to keep them in heart. For to men of their stamp and on their line of work, the life of the horse was life to them.

"How long is this cursed storm going to last?" asked Omaha Charley of Bear-Claw, who went with him that afternoon to the edge of the timber to take an outlook.

"Him stop when sun go down. Clear up to-night—morning we go on, but keep clear of stream—they full—over bank!" was the answer.

"A whole day lost—but it can't be helped!" said the outlaw, gloomily.

"I hate to lose time when my men are fresh and eager for work!"

The rain still poured in torrents, but his men laughed and sung and played cards under their shelter, and took things easy. They were in comfort, though their horses were not as well off.

By sunset the storm had ceased, but then it was too late for the outlaws to break camp.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE HEIRESS.

"You're ahead of schedule-time—what's up, Cody?" asked the station agent at Sweetwater, when the young Express Rider dashed in full a quarter of an hour ahead of time, his pony dripping with sweat.

"Got no time to shoot my mouth off now!" cried Will, as he jumped from his pony. "Take care of the Express and give it to Sam when he's saddled up. Send Roany to stable!"

Away on the run the strange lad went for Old Jake's tent without any further explanation.

"The boy is clean dead gone on Miss Libbie!" said the agent. "He gets worse the longer she stays here—I wish her father would move on. The boys all just about worship her—just as if she was an angel. If I hadn't a wife and three kids in St. Louis I believe I'd be as bad off as any of 'em, for she is next thing to the angels!"

The other Pony Express Rider had run for his horse when he saw Will coming, and he now snatched his mail from the agent's hands, leaped into his saddle and was off, full ten minutes then to spare.

Meantime Will had rushed into the tent where Old Jake was busy mending a bridle, and Libbie was knitting a scarf with tri-colored yarn—red, white and blue.

Cody held a newspaper in his hand, and breathlessly asked of Old Jake a series of questions.

"Did you ever hear of one Walter Edgecombe, or a Lord Glenarvon?"

"Yes—yes—what news have you of them, or him, for Walter Edgecombe and Lord Glenarvon are one!"

"Lord Glenarvon is dead and half of his property, over one hundred million dollars in all, goes to his daughter!" cried Will, waving the paper in the air and looking straight at Libbie.

"Praised be the Lord—at last my darling has come to her rights!" said Old Jake, his eyes streaming with tears while he spoke—tears of joy rather than grief.

"Do you know where Lord Glenarvon's daughter is?" asked Will.

"Yes—Elizabeth Edgecombe, the daughter of Walter and Edith Edgecombe, sits there, knitting a scarf for Master William Cody!"

"The heiress of money enough to buy out all Nebraska with Kansas thrown in, knitting me, a poor Pony Express Rider, a scarf? It's a cursed shame!" cried Will.

"What does all this mean?" asked Libbie, her blue eyes so large and wondering. "Will, I thought you never drank liquor!"

"Neither do I, little sister, for you're that till they get your own, and then I can never, never see you more. If I'm drunk it is with joy that you, whom I love so well, are rich and can take good Old Jake to a lordly home. His days of trading are over I reckon! Read that, Rosebud, read that!"

And Will handed Libbie a copy of the Chicago paper—such as the reader has seen an extract from, and another paper from Omaha stating that the Honorable Mr. Normand had purchased a fit-out and was about to start across the plains. All these had come on by Pony Express, and of course were three or four days ahead of Mr. Normand, if he was on his way.

The fair girl read the notices in silent wonder.

"Am I—I the one these papers speak of?" she asked at last.

"Libbie, you are the lawful daughter and heiress of Lord Glenarvon. I hold all the proofs—or have them safe where I can produce them if they are needed. Your mother, dying, gave you to my charge, and said God would deal with me as I dealt with you. God has been good to me—I have tried to do all my duty to you!"

"You have—you have. You have been the only father I ever knew—you are my father still and always shall be!" cried Libbie.

"My darling—my darling, you're too good!" sobbed the old man. "But you don't think. You're a great lady—rich almost beyond belief—worth more money than I could count in dollars in five years, and they're coming to find you and take you to England, to your great castle and—"

The poor old man broke down and went to crying like a baby.

"No one shall ever take me from you, dear father! Now stop. I will not have you breaking your heart for nothing. Do you hear?"

And rising, she stamped her foot almost angrily on the ground.

"Child—I will not stand in your way. I'm only Old Jake Limbertoes, and I can't be nothing else!"

"And I'm only Libbie Limbertoes and I won't be anything else!" cried the girl, firmly.

"You'll see—wait till this cousin or whatever he is comes up the line and tells you what waits for you in England!"

"He'll not find me, father. I want you to move camp—get right out of here quick, and go where nobody can find us!"

"Nobody?" Have you got sick of seeing me, little sister?" asked Will Cody, in a mournful tone.

"No—no, Will! I did not mean that! I love you, my good brother, as a sister should and am always glad to see you!"

"Well, little one, comfort father Jake. Wait till this gentleman comes up the road and hear what he has to tell you. I shall see him first, most likely, and he shall not take you one step further than you want to go!"

"Thank you, Will. Father, cheer up. Everything will turn out right yet!"

"Yes—darling, yes—it is coming right, and you will have your own sooner than I dared to hope. We'll wait, as Will says, and see this Mr. Normand that he says is coming. I don't remember that name—but it is so in the paper, and I guess it's not wrong."

When the old man became composed, Will Cody went over to the station, carrying one of the papers with him.

There he explained to the agent what had hurried him up so, and when the news spread that Miss Libbie was an heiress, cheer upon cheer attested her popularity there.

CHAPTER XXIX.

HARD PRESSED.

WHEN the first gong sounded in the cave of One-Eyed Clare the cooks were up and at their bright rekindled fires, hard at work on the morning meal.

There was no expedition going off, for a fearful storm of wind and rain was raging, and it was late before the sleepy night watch came in from the stables to call the cooks, as was the custom.

Now, when it was time to carry the food to the tables and make the second call, while the cooks were busy and the outlaws rising and washing, a startling discovery was made in mess 16, that over which Croppy acted as captain.

Neither that close-eared individual or the lately installed mess-worker, Tenderfoot Lercher, as he was called, could be found.

Search was made through the cavern, their names called loudly, but no reply came, and the officer of the guard found one rifle and two revolvers missing from his rack.

"They've deserted!" was the cry, and instant report was made to the chief.

Desertion was so unusual—so dangerous and so terribly punished, that the chief did not believe it had occurred in this case.

"Haven't they gone for water and staid to watch the storm?" he asked.

"No, sir—we've been out there. Arms are gone from the guard-rack—a rubber coat from the guard line also."

"Let ten men breakfast quick and mount in pursuit. There is no use to take dogs in this rain, but scour the country far and near."

"Send up the long signal smoke. It cannot be seen far—but send it up. It may warn Omaha Charley if he camped early yesterday. Give me the names of every buter guard and his post. It was a bad night for them—but even in the storm they should have kept every pass secure!"

Clare was very calm. Therefore doubly dangerous. He never vented his fury in violent action. But when he struck—the blow meant death.

In twenty minutes ten mounted men struck the two trails that led from the cavern.

In an hour after ten more, all well clad in waterproofs, with orders to scout far and near,

and if a trace of the fugitives was found to follow it up and to bring them back alive.

There was a fearful meaning in that order. Though constitutionally a liar, Croppy had told the truth when he spoke of the penalty for leaving Salvation Hall without permission.

Thus—our fugitives, as they had reason to expect, were far from safety, though well hidden and full twenty miles from their starting-point.

In their hidden niche the two lay, sleeping alternately, as we know through a previous chapter, until the storm abated and a clear, starlight night was upon them.

Croppy crept out to reconnoiter. He saw the slender crescent of the new moon—its first phase. That would last scarce half an hour—it gave no extra light anyway.

They were too far from the hills whence they had fled, to see the range by starlight. Even a man riding on a horse could not have been seen very far.

Croppy returned to Lercher.

"We'll eat a little bite of your soaked meat and start!" he said. "We've got to keep eyes and ears on the alert. Men are surely out—the Old Man will keep them there till we are heard from, so we've got to go slow and careful, lest we tumble on some party laying for us!"

Lercher had little to say. The first excitement of escaping was over, he was stiff and sore, tired already, for he was not used to foot travel. But he got out his meat, threw away the sour stuff which had been bread before the rain made paste of it, and the two ate a lunch. Neither was very hungry, but they knew they must keep up strength.

After an hour went by, both crawled out through the bushes that veiled their hiding-place and stood erect. They listened for a few moments, heard no sound except the barking of a coyote, and then moved on.

Croppy took the lead and Lercher followed close, keeping along a rocky ridge where they would leave no track. He had been a robber too long not to be keen and subtle.

They went thus for miles until they came to the end of the ridge, and then Croppy felt uneasy. On the plain, the ground yet wet and soft, their feet must leave an impression. And if on the next day that track was seen—they were lost. For there were men in Clare's band, and such men would be out, skilled in following trails, equal to the best of Indians on the scout.

"I don't like it. But we must go on!" he said.

And forward, as fast now as they could move, they passed.

It was full midnight before they halted for a moment. Then Lercher said mournfully:

"I'm so worn down—it seems as if I'd drop!"

"Don't go to giving up now. We must get to some cover before day. It's all open here—a man could be seen five miles by daylight. I'll rest a little, a very little while—Ah! look there!"

A dim light was seen on a point of the ridge, not over a half-mile from where they had left it.

"What is it?" asked Lercher.

"The least bit of a camp-fire. Some of the men out after us have camped so as to take an early start in the morning."

"I'll go right on—I'm tired, but I'll go while I can drag one foot after the other."

And the two men hurried on as fast as they could go, all their thoughts being to get as far from the fire they had seen as they could before day.

The morning star was rising when Croppy heard the dash of a running stream near by.

"There's our best chance for safety. I hear water running. There's no track left in that. Even a dog loses scent there."

Rushing on, they came to a brook. It was full from the recent rains and very cold. No matter.

Lercher groaned when he followed Croppy into it.

"No matter, man; we've got to stand it! If our tracks are struck, here's our only chance."

"There's timber scattered along, and by daylight we'll find a hiding-place."

The stream ran east in the direction they wanted to go to get to the big stage-road.

Did Croppy head that way? No—he knew too much. That would be the very course his pursuers would believe they would take if tracked to the water.

He turned up-stream and headed almost back toward the ridge they had left. Lercher asked him why.

"Button your mouth and come on. We've not an hour left to find a hiding-place for all day—not a second to waste!" cried Croppy, angrily.

Lercher groaned and staggered on, cold in spite of their speed.

CHAPTER XXX.

IN THE SADDLE.

Two hours before day Omaha Charley had his men astir on the morning after the storm. The last ration of corn was fed to the horses, for they shivered and stamped at the picket-line impatiently.

Breakfast—hot coffee, and plenty of it, with cold bread and meat—was served, and the men warmed up before rousing fires.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A QUEER HIDING-PLACE.

The balance of the time before dawn was spent in grooming down the horses and rubbing life into their chilled and stiffened limbs.

Omaha Charley himself attended to Satan, his noble steed, and the strong firelight fell on sleek fine-looking animals when the work was done.

"We've a long, hard ride ahead, boys," said the leader, "and none of this work is wasted. Our horses are as necessary as our arms, for when we strike the Overland route we touch a region where troops are moving often, and we must keep in condition for a run if we fall afoul of more of them than we want to handle."

There was no dissenting voice to this. One gruff voice said: "The Cap's head is level!" That was all.

As soon as day was fairly open and the rosy sky told that the sun was rising, every man leaped to the saddle, and Bear-Claw taking the lead, headed out on the prairie a little south of east.

First at a trot, then as the animals warmed to their work, a steady lope, the party went swiftly on.

Mile after mile, hour after hour, no rein was drawn until the sun felt hot and the animals began to show foam-flecks on the bit.

Water was reached—the horses refreshed with a drink, the first since dawn, and they were off again, swift as before.

At noon—an hour to grass, every saddle off, and the men lunched while their horses rested and fed.

Then a remount and forward. Thus, when a second night approached, Omaha Charley could see, though at a long distance, the ragged range of hills through which the Sweetwater dashed, and his eye flashed as he said to his men:

"I'll put you into work, lads, inside of four-and-twenty hours!"

A cheer rose from many a rude throat, wild eyes flashed, for they were a class of men who did not like to have rusty arms in their belts.

"You remember our old camp, Bear-Claw?" asked the leader.

"Yes! He thereaway. But me know better one. That too close road. Men go by, smell smoke. Back—more near sundown, good bush—water, grass, heap good. No more three hour from station."

"All right—guide us there, and we'll camp till I send a man to get the lay of things, and see who is there and how they shape."

"What time can we make that camp to-morrow?"

"We go in camp now, 'fore soon. Rest horse—start afore day—get there sun right overhead!"

"At noon—three hours to spare for the scout—no, six, three to go three to come. We can make a night-swoop, if nothing turns up to change my plans."

They were now near timber—a straggling line of trees that marked a water-course, and to the thickest growth in sight the Indian headed his horse.

"Not so nice camp as last night—me seen worse all same!" said Bear-Claw, when he drew rein in a narrow bit of timber beside a sluggish stream of not very bright water.

The men dismounted and unsaddled, and quickly each horse was picketed out in grass almost up to his knees—green and fresh near the stream, though dry out on the prairie where the sun and wind had play upon it.

They had small fires lighted, sufficient for making coffee—but not large enough to attract attention from distant points, for the timber along the stream grew too sparse to make good cover. And Omaha Charley, as the men soon learned, was no "slouch"—he neglected no precaution. If troops or hostile Indians were in camp anywhere near he would not call them to his position or invite surprise by carelessness.

The men supped, having plenty of food ready cooked and all the hot coffee they desired.

There was liquor in the package of stores, but it was kept for emergencies—not for common use. Too well did the bold leader know that more mischief than good came of its use, and he wanted no courage among his followers that was based on other than a natural cause.

Two hours to grass filled the horses, and they were brought in and tied securely to one picket-line and resaddled. Thus they stood ready for instant use in case of alarm.

The discipline of banded outlaws on the plains and that of regular cavalry in the field is so much alike, one could see no difference. Both are ever kept alert, for no one knows when peril is near or whence it may come.

A strong line of sentinels for camp and horses was set after supper, and then the rest laid down to sleep near the camp-fires, wrapped in coats and blankets, each man with his arms at his side ready for instant use.

Apart from the guards few were awake but the leader when the midnight relief was called.

He, standing near a fire, thought of the lovely girl who had so bravely escaped from his power before and whom he meant again to capture, and his heart thrilled with the remembrance of her beauty.

"Hal! Guards—look sharp!" he cried. "I hear the thud of horses' hoofs upon the prairie. They come this way and are on the run!"

"HALT there! Halt!" shouted the outer sentinel on the line. "Who comes there?"

"One o' Clare's men—hold your fire—I've been on your trail all day. You ride like Old Nick!"

"It's Benjy, the Kid. I know his voice!" cried the officer of the guard, addressing his leader.

"Advance—what did you follow our trail for?" asked Omaha Charley, as a young fellow, a mere boy of fifteen or sixteen, rode into camp.

"I was sent, cap'n, by your boss an' mine. One-Eyed Clare told me not to draw rein till I found you. And I've had a time—I have! I didn't find your last camp till late this morning, and I had to stop to feed or my horse would have gone down under me. I'm sent to tell you Croppy and the tenderfoot you brought there—Lercher they called him—have both lit out. They got away in the storm, and they hadn't been caught when I left, nor any sign found."

"They'll get short shrift, if I see them!" said Omaha Charley. "I'll shoot the dogs on sight!"

"And Clare will roast 'em if he gets them, sir. But he told me to tell you to look out—if they do get all clear of them as is after them—they may try to spoil your game!"

"Ah—that is true! Did they have fast horses?"

"Didn't have any. Trotted out on Shank's mare!" said the boy.

"Then, if afoot, they can't make time on me. I'll be ahead of any mischief they can work!"

"They travel while you sleep, sir. Most like they ran their best all that night in the rain. If they kept on all day, as scared men are apt to—they've gone a long way. Twenty men are out after 'em though, and their chances are rough an' scatterin'. Didn't you see the long smoke the chief sent up?"

"No—in a rain and wind storm like the one we were in, no smoke could be seen two miles!"

"That's so, sir—but he had the smoke made for all that, hopin' it might be seen."

The boy had unsaddled his tired horse while he talked, and he now picketed it in the nearest grass, and then went to the fire and got a cup of coffee.

It was a late hour to take rest, but Omaha Charley knew he must have some sleep to be fit for duty on the coming day, and he dropped on a blanket to take it.

As before, preparations were made for a very early start. The horses were led to grass as soon as the morning star was seen. By dawn all were ready to move, and while the band held off southeast, Benjy, the Kid, took a back trail for Salvation Hall.

As he had no special time set for his return, and he heard One-Eyed Clare say that he would give a thousand dollars apiece for the deserters alive, or half as much for their scalps, he thought he would do a little scouting on his own hook. So he bore to the right on his return, so as to make a circuit out toward the stage-road and see if he could cross any foot-tracks—for most men traveled on horses, whether they were red or white, in that region.

Leaving the "Kid" to carry out his intentions, we will return to where we left "Croppy" and his unhappy companion.

They had taken to a stream, the reader will remember, in which, by wading, all trace of their footsteps would be lost.

Up this water-course for a mile or more they kept, each moment carrying them nearer to the ridge they had just left. It was now growing light. If a hiding-place was not soon found they were in fearful peril.

A sound as of falling water was heard, and Croppy gasped out:

"A beaver-dam—we are saved! It is my last hope—for I heard horsemen on the ridge, plainly."

In a few seconds, hurrying on, they clambered over a dam in the falling water into a pond clear up to their necks in still water. There were several beaver-houses—conical mounds, just above the dam, and dropping his gun in the deep water, Croppy, motioning his companion to follow him, dipped under water, in a beaver-hole or entrance to a house.

In an instant both men were inside, in darkness, but upon a dry shelf or platform in the deserted beaver-house.

It was dark but still in there, only a little air-hole above.

This Croppy very carefully and slightly enlarged, making an aperture in the mud roof through which he could see.

"My Jeremiah!" he muttered, in a loud tone. "If we'd gone down-stream we'd have been taken. There's four of Clare's scouts down there, and they've seen our tracks. They've run their horses in that direction, and they think they'll nab us."

"We'll never get away!" groaned Lercher.

"Oh, why did I ever come to this blasted country?"

"Be still, you fool. You're safe now. No scout livin' or even an Injun would ever look

for us here. We're in a warm place—no wind—just air enough to breathe—warm it will be with the heat of our bodies by and by!"

"There's no heat in mine. It is all soaked out!" moaned Lercher. "There's pieces of wood here—couldn't we make a fire?"

"Not much. If we could we wouldn't. The least bit of smoke might be seen. No, pard—we've got to lay close and get warm as well as we can. And we've got to stay the day out, and get warm when on the run to-night. We've got to make tracks then, or starve. Our provisions are soaked so they'll spoil—they're hardly fit to eat now. And we can't get more. My gun is useless and at the bottom of the pond, our pistols and ammunition ruined—no good any more, without it might be to scare some one who'd think they were all right. We'll not throw 'em away, as I did the gun!"

"You beat all the men I ever heard of—there seems to be no give-up in you. If I was alone, I'd lay down and die!" said Lercher.

"That wouldn't pay! I've got nigh on to three thousand in gold on me, and that'll buy a heap o' comfort after all this sufferin'. And you've your bank-book—wrapped as I told you in oilcloth, haven't you?"

"Yes—that's all right. It's here in my breast-pocket!"

"Well—hold on to that, for, by Jeremiah, we're going to pull through—I feel it in my bones!"

"I only fee aches in my bones!" groaned the Englishman.

"Well—roll up tight in your blanket and steam 'em off. If you can sleep—you'll wake up better. I'll snug up to you and you'll see we'll dry off in here—wet as we are!"

"Suppose the beavers come in?"

"There's no beaver here now. They've either been trapped off or scared away this two or three years. This wood you talked of is dry—dry as a bone. When beaver were here, it was green and used for their food! They eat bark and grass and fish, I've been told! I don't know much about 'em, only I've seen their houses before and broke into 'em from outside!"

"Can you see them scouts now?"

"No—they're ten mile from here by this time. They'll follow the stream down till they think we've been gone too long and they've lost us! Then—they'll go back—like as not without reporting they've seen tracks, for old Clare would just rave if they did, 'cause they lost the trail. I know him—you bet—from A to Izard!"

"Oh dear—I never will get warm again! I believe I'll die right here!"

"Well, you're underground anyway, so there'll want no diggin' to plant you!"

"It's a great time to joke, when a chap is dyin'!"

"Dyin' isn't in the bill yet, pard. Here—take the rest o' this corn-juice. It'll warm us both up!"

The outlaw took a swallow from the bottle and then handed it to Lercher, who emptied it at a draught.

A little while, and the Englishman slept. But Croppy peeped often through the air-holes in the mound, evidently fearing either that the scouts he had seen might return, or others strike the trail.

At last, growing warm in the close little beaver-house, Croppy dropped asleep also.

When he woke, Lercher was sitting up, chewing on some soaked meat, and outside it was growing dark. Night was upon them.

"How do you feel?" asked Croppy.

"A great deal better. I'm warm now and rested ever so much!"

"Then we'll start, as soon as I've had a bite. We've got to make the settlements now or starve! We've nothing to kill game with, even if we dared to fire. Our arms are ruined by water and we've no chance to clean 'em—no tools to take off a lock or draw a wet charge!"

"I'm ready—but must we go through the water to get out of here?"

"Not as we came in—but we'll wade the stream above the dam. I studied out a course to-day where I think we'll be safest. If I could get right on Omaha Charley's trail I'd follow it! No one would think of looking for us there!"

"He'll strike out for Sweetwater Station where the girl is."

"So will we. I'll break a hole out of this den low down on the land side, and then we'll be off!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

BENJY.

BENJY, the Kid, though young in years, was old in crime. He was at Salvation Hall because he dared not make a home anywhere else. He had coldly and deliberately waylaid and shot a schoolmaster who had punished him in school for bad conduct—stealing the gun he did it with, and following it by taking a horse, saddle and bridle to get away with.

He belonged in Des Moines, but had been sent from home to board and go to school, because he was so unruly at home his parents could do nothing with him.

They thought he might do better away among strangers. He had done worse. He was fear-

less, hot-tempered and literally fiendish in his disposition.

A good shot, he was sent out to hunt a good deal of the time to keep him alone where he would have no one to quarrel with. For, to use an old phrase, he was in "hot water" half the time when at the cave—as ready to draw and shoot, too, as the oldest ruffian in the gang.

When he left the camp of Omaha Charley he took a course of his own that led at an angle from a direct course back to Clare's cave. He was good on a trail if he struck one, his hunting-expeditions had trained him for that.

Armed with a brace of revolvers, knife and rifle, he felt himself capable of dealing with the deserters if he found them, for he had once backed Croppy square down in a quarrel, and the Englishman was a "no account cuss" in his opinion.

Riding very leisurely, allowing nothing to escape his glance, he crossed several trails of horsemen, scouts he rightly conjectured, but saw no sign of footmen.

When night came upon him he was within a few miles of the stage-road, not more than ten or fifteen in his judgment, and finding a good place to camp in a little grove watered by a small running stream, he staked out his horse while the sun was an hour high, shot a fawn which he saw skulking in the edge of the brush, and prepared himself a good supper.

All this was done before night had fairly settled on him, so he was all snug when darkness fell upon his surroundings.

Taking "a pull" from a flask he carried, for he nursed a man's vices, he filled and lighted a pipe and smoked for an hour or two, then brought his horse in and secured him with a doubled lariat to a tree near his camp-fire, replenished that with some solid chunks of wood, and rolled in his blanket, feet to the fire, went to sleep as comfortable in his mind as he would have been in his rich father's house, over five hundred miles away.

There he lay and dreamed. He was a great hand to dream, and scarce ever woke in the cave without some wild dream to tell his comrades, over the breakfast-table.

This night he dreamed of what was last in his mind, the capture of the two fugitives, which he knew, if accomplished, would put him up to the top notch in the good graces of One-Eyed Clare, and make him a hero among the men.

He dreamed he had struck the trail and was hot upon it, with his rifle unstrung and ready for use. Suddenly he came upon the two men, footsore and weary, almost famished, and he gave a yell of delight as he called out:

"Halt! Surrender!"

The dream was so vivid that he woke with his own voice ringing in his ears.

Ha! What did he see? As sure as he lived, bending there over his own camp-fire, he saw the tall, ungainly form of "Croppy," and beside him was Lercher, the tenderfoot. They were actually cooking some of his venison. They had stirred up the coals, and he heard the fat, juicy meat sizzling on them. Its savory scent reached his nostrils.

"Cussed if this is a dream!" he muttered to himself, and tried to reach for a pistol in his belt.

But he could not move his hands. His feet, too, seemed out of order. Then he discovered that a part of his lariat had been put to service and he was bound and helpless.

A cry of rage burst from his lips.

"Ah—Benjy—my cully, have you woke at last? You must have taken too big a dose o' corn-juice when you turned in. I never saw a boy sleep better."

Croppy laughed as he saw the boy strive to break his bonds before he answered the ruffian's taunting speech.

"It's no use, my dear Kid—no use. I tied them knots myself. And if you were loose, we've borrowed all your tools, and you couldn't do much beyond scratchin' and biting!"

"Let me up—let me up, I say!" yelled Benjy.

"Not just yet. We two are hungry. We've got our breakfast almost cooked. We'll give you some by and by if you're not too naughty. It is no use for you to strain so—you'll only hurt yourself, lad. You're fast!"

"Cuss you, I'll cut your heart out when I get loose!"

"You can't. I've got your knife in my belt," said Croppy, with provoking coolness.

The boy felt that he was helpless—he could not rise, tied hand and foot, he could not even turn. For a little while he raged and foamed, swearing awfully. Then he went to crying. The two men were eating ravenously, while he raged and foamed. When he got to sobbing, Croppy came over to where he lay and offered to feed him.

"I'm not hungry. But do please untie me. The rope hurts awful!"

"Shouldn't wonder if it did," said Croppy. "But not half as much as it would if it was around your neck!"

"What do you-uns mean to do with me—you aren't going to hang me?" groaned the boy.

"No—not if you keep quiet. You've been so good to us. You've left a pint of corn-juice for us to warm up on—you had a nice fire for us to

warm by—that was the way we happened to know you was here. And then you had venison dressed for our breakfast. You've been real good, Benjy. Your rifle and pistols, too, are in prime order, while our weapons are water-soaked, so we've exchanged. And we're going to borrow your horse, Benjy, in a few minutes. He is big and strong, and we want to make about a dozen or fifteen miles before daylight, and that isn't more than two or three hours now."

"You'll untie me before you go, won't you?" groaned Benjy.

"Not much, my pretty Kid. You'd take our trail, and never leave it until you got us in as bad a fix as you are!"

The Kid did not reply. Croppy had told exactly what was in his mind.

"When we're safe—say down in Texas, or over in Arkansaw, we'll send you word!" continued Croppy, who did all the talking.

Lercher was too hungry to talk yet, and was using his jaws to better advantage.

"You'll never get there!" said the boy, savagely. "There are over twenty men on your trail, and Omaha Charley knows you're on the run. I carried the news to him. He'll find you, and pay for what I've got to suffer."

"We'll take the risk. So good-by. We'll saddle up, now, Lercher, and be off. We've no more time to waste!"

"All right!" said Lercher, swallowing a huge mouthful of meat. "I'm ready now. I don't feel as if I could eat again in a week, I'm that full!"

The boy gnashed his teeth and fairly groaned when he saw Croppy throw the saddle on his horse, and get ready to leave.

"If you're half human, let loose my hands!" he cried. "I'll lay here and starve, and the wolves will tear me to pieces before I'm dead!"

"Well—that wouldn't be any harder than to get roasted at the stake. And there's where we'd be, if you could have caught us foul!" said Croppy, coolly, as he slung the Kid's rifle at his back and then mounted the horse.

"Cuss ye—I'll see ye there yet!" yelled the boy.

"Get on behind, pard—I must be off before the Kid chokes himself a-cussin'!"

Lercher sprang up behind Croppy, the horse was started, heading eastward, and the boy wept long and bitterly while he listened to the sound of its feet loping away.

Then—growing more calm, he raised his swollen wrists to his mouth and tried to gnaw the tough rawhide of the lariat asunder.

In vain was the effort. It was hard as iron.

"There's one way—it may cripple me—but it's better than starving here, where no one may ever even see my bones!"

As the boy said this, with a struggle he managed to roll over and turn his head toward the smoldering fire. Then he hitched and struggled along until he could reach a burning brand. Over this he held the knotted part of the oiled hide rope. His flesh cracked and blistered, but he knew the rope if on fire would burn, and in spite of the terrible pain he held his wrists right there on that fiery brand.

Groaning—tears streaming down his face, yet knowing it was life or death, he rejoiced when he saw the rope blazing.

Now—straining desperately, he worked in his agony to aid the fire in tearing the cruel knots apart that held the tortured arms together. Shrieking with the agony—yet never withdrawing from the fire, at last the bonds loosened and his shriveled hands and wrists were free. The rope, yet burning, dropped apart and fell to the ground, and he rolled back from the fire, his hands and arms half cooked.

He could scarcely move a finger. Every effort was agony.

It was broad day when, after three or four hours of effort, almost dead with pain, he got the rope untied that held his feet together. Then, rising, he staggered to the little spring and fell on his face over the water. While he drank, he thrust his raw, bleeding, almost fleshless wrists into the water and tried to cool the awful heat.

The water was sweet to his parched throat, it cooled his hot face and lips—but it seemed to add to the pain in his hands and arms.

He rose and staggered out upon the prairie. He looked for and found the trail of his horse. And groaning as he went, he put his eyes to duty, set his glance on that trail and followed it. He swore a bitter oath and made a terrible vow as he went doggedly on.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

LAGGED.

ALMOST two weeks on the road, Neville Normand and his companions Duncan Young and the valet rejoiced to hear that their journey was nearly at an end as far as going westward was concerned.

For at the station where they spent their thirteenth night on the road, they met young Frank Powell, who had the day before left his friend Will Cody at the end of his eastern pony route. The young student was on his way back to school, but as soon as he learned through Mr. Normand's inquiries who he was, he not only

told him all he knew about Libbie, but volunteered to go back with them to the station where she was yet in camp.

Mr. Normand had heard far down the line all about the abduction and rescue, for it had passed from rider to rider of the Pony Express, and from driver to driver on the coaches, until it had almost become an "old story."

Expecting, by pushing their horses, to reach Sweetwater by night, the four riders were in saddle as soon as breakfast was over, and moving up the road at a fair gait.

Mr. Normand had got fairly used to the life and liked it. Plain food and constant exercise gave a rich glow to his handsome face.

The old valet was always tired at night, but he slept well and his will was strong. So he turned out fresh every morning, and the thought that he would see his "young lady" as he called her when she was spoken of, kept his heart and courage up.

He had asked young Powell many questions about her looks, and the romantic young man had described such a pretty picture that the valet said she must be just like her mother.

For he remembered and spoke of her exceeding beauty as if he had seen her but yesterday.

The four riders—riding by twos—Normand and Powell in the lead, had got about half-way between stations, when suddenly, turning a bend of the road, they came upon two men riding on one horse.

They looked as if they would have got off the road to escape notice if they could, but it was too late, for the parties were not two rods apart when they sighted each other.

Normand and Powell checked their horses as the two riders came up, and the former said:

"Good-day, men! Horses must be scarce where you come from, for I see you ride double!"

"Yes. My pard here had bad luck—the cussed red-skins got his horse yesterday and came fearful nigh a-gittin' him. I was down the drink a-buntin' and lit out to help him, but they'd shot his anamile afore I got up, and he'd had to foot it hum if 'tweren't for me."

"The red cusses has been my torment ever since I've been on the plains. Once they had me tied up to the torture-stake to roast. They'd cut off my ears and stuck my body all full o' pine knots, and was jest a-lightin' on 'em when a party o' white men dashed in on 'em and saved me!"

"The same old story, Jeremiah Scrope!" said Mr. Duncan Young, who had eyed Croppy closely while he talked. "I heard you tell it last in Joliet prison when you had a life sentence! Keep your hands up, you villain—I've got the drop on you!"

"You have, by Jeremiah! I give up!" groaned Croppy—looking a cocked revolver in the muzzle.

"Drop your tools—quick! Mr. Powell, just take their weapons from those men, while I hold the trigger on them. One is an old convict, who killed a keeper and escaped a couple of years ago. There is a thousand-dollar reward for him. Who is your partner, old man?"

"A tenderfoot, boss. He hasn't done no wrong. We've both run away from One-Eyed Clare's gang, and if luck hadn't gone against us, we'd have been in England in a month, living square."

"In England, eh? Is your friend an Englishman?" asked Normand.

Powell had disarmed the men—they had but two pistols and a knife between them—those they had taken from Benjy, the Kid.

All the party were now dismounted.

Croppy was slow in answering Normand's question, and he repeated it, addressing the man Lercher himself.

"Yees, zur—I be from Yorkshire," said Lercher, assuming a stolid look and a new dialect.

Duncan Young drew a card from his pocket, and was looking at it intently when Mr. Normand replied:

"From Yorkshire? What is your name?"

"Jemmy Gloan, zur!" and he touched his tattered hat.

"Alias Eugene Lercher! The description is plain, only the scoundrel looks used up!" cried the detective.

"Oh, Lord! I'm ruined!" groaned the unhappy wretch, forgetting his Yorkshire dialect in his terror.

"We're in the same boat yet, pard. We might better have stayed at Salvation Hall!" growled Croppy.

"It all comes o' you leavin' that poor boy to die! I told you bad luck would come of it!" groaned Lercher.

"What boy?" asked the detective, sternly.

"A scout from old Clare's gang, sir—we were afoot and a'most starved, and we found the boy camped and tied him up and eat his provision and took his horse and arms and left him there to die!"

"Bosh! He'll never die till he hangs for the murders he's done!" growled Croppy.

"How far away did you leave him?" asked the detective.

"Fifteen or twenty mile, I reckon. Some o' his gang will find him, you bet. What are you going to do with us, now we're lagged?"

"We'll see when we get to the next station. Get on your horses again and head the other way!" said the detective, sternly.

"I haven't done anything to be arrested for!" Lercher whined. "I'd as lieve go afoot as not—if you'll only let me go!"

"You've done nothing, eh? We'll see when I take you to Chicago. I brought a warrant from there with me for Eugene Lercher, and you are he!"

"Oh mercy! They'll hang an innocent man—I didn't poison Sam Wilson, on my soul I didn't!" cried the wretch, trembling like a leaf in a gale.

"Fool! You've given yourself away! You ought to hang for your want o' sense!" said his companion, now remounted.

"Get on that horse as you was before, and be in a hurry or I'll help you!" said the officer.

"I'm lost! I'm lost!" groaned Lercher, as he obeyed.

"And I'm found, all through trying to help you, you bloody cur!" cried Croppy. "I'll chaw you all up before we part—see if I don't!"

The whole party now moved rapidly forward to the next station, where it was decided to leave the two men in irons and under guard in an outbuilding belonging to the station.

Duncan Young procured two men to watch the temporary prison by turns, and engaged board for all from the station-agent until the return of his party.

He had searched both men and taken away their arms and last dollar, so they could not bribe a release, or effect an escape.

As new irons had to be made for the prisoners by the station blacksmith, the party was detained until nearly noon, so they had their horses fed and took lunch themselves while waiting.

Then, with their horses fresh, they started on more rapidly than ever, hoping yet to make Sweetwater some time that night, though they had lost much time. They only had two stations to pass to reach that, where, Powell told Mr. Normand, he would find Cody, the hero of the rescue.

"We're both in for a swing!" cried Croppy, to his partner, as they sat on a bench in the gloomy room of their confinement.

"Yes—but they'll hang an innocent man when I swing!" moaned Lercher. "I know Sam Wilson took too much morphine and it killed him—but he took it himself. I only put it where he could reach it when he was sufferin' and half crazy!"

"That wasn't murder—oh no! Not more'n when I choked a keeper at Joliet till he couldn't breathe and then borrowed his keys and overcoat and gun and got away!"

The fiend laughed bitterly as he spoke.

Ah, how little did either know then that a relentless and merciless fate was creeping upon them. *Justice—slow but sure!*

CHAPTER XXXIV. THE "POOR ORFIN."

As his feet grew warmer and the circulation came back, Benjy, the Kid, increased his speed while he followed the plain trail made by his horse under its double load. His small, sharp face was thin and pinched with the agony he felt, for his hands and wrists were all black and shriveled with exposure to the air, for he could not use them enough to tear off a garment to wrap them in.

On—on, untiring in his thirst for vengeance, only caring to reach them to betray them, the boy sped forward. Arriving at the road, he saw where they had been intercepted. Carefully he examined the tracks that came up the road, saw where men had dismounted there and then, remounting, gone on.

"The cusses have been lagged! They're prisoners! Here's where Croppy dropped my gun in the road! I'll bet some one had the drop on him!" muttered the boy, noticing the prints of the gun in the sand just where Croppy had dropped it. "Good—I'll follow 'em up an' give 'em away, if they're not known to them that's got 'em!"

And the boy, tireless in his hate, trudged forward up the road as fast as he could walk. He was suffering fearful pain, but now not a groan escaped his lips; he was on a sure track and he hoped soon to see the wretches who had left him to die. Oh, if he could make them suffer as he was suffering, for his agony was fearful. It seemed as if his wrists and hands would fall apart.

It was almost dark when the boy came in sight of the station. He looked about and did not show himself until it got so dark that his appearance would not attract especial attention.

Then, seeing a man grooming a horse in front of the stables, he approached him and said:

"You haven't seen any loose horses around here, have you? I lost mine on the prairie today."

"No!" said the man. "There's no strange horses here except a big roan, with a white nose that two men rode in on, that are ironed and locked up to be kept till them that took 'em come down the road!"

"Did one of 'em have both ears cut off close to his big bullet head?"

"Yes—you've hit it. Do you know him?"

"I know he stole my hoss! That white-nosed roan, branded with a star on the hip is mine!"

"It has got the brand! Who are you?"

"A poor orfin, what lives back o' Lone Tree Station, with my aunt. I was a-huntin' and got belated out after game and camped. And two cusses crept up on me in the night. They tied me with my own lariat and took my gun and horse and left me so I couldn't move hand or foot, to starve an' die!"

"The wretches!"

"They did!" said the boy—"they did!"

"How ever did you get loose to get here?" asked the man.

"Look at them hands!" said the boy. "I burned the hide-lariat loose and then tracked my horse clean here—I reckon forty mile, for I've been comin' ever since daylight!"

The lad stretched out his black and shriveled hands.

"Awful!" said the man, with a shudder. "Come right into the station with me. We'll do all we can for you."

"But don't tell them prisoners yet that I'm here. I want to scare them by an' by. They'll think I'm a ghost!"

"All right—come on. Mercy, how you must suffer!"

The boy was soon surrounded in the station by the agent and all hands at the station, to whom he repeated the story he had told the stableman.

Pity and sympathy, in action as well as in words, was meted out to the "poor orfin!"

One man brought him a tumblerful of whisky, another a plateful of bread and meat, cut up in mouthful pieces, so he could be fed. The agent got linen cloths and a bottle of sweet oil, tearing up two good shirts to make bandages, and soon the poor hands were dressed as well as they could be in the absence of a surgeon.

Nerved up and strengthened with whisky, fed by kind hands, the boy felt better, though his pain was intense. He asked for a lighted pipe, and when it was put in his mouth smoked it with a gusto which astonished the men, who wondered how he could endure such suffering and make no complaint.

He had learned all about the arrest of the two men held as murderers, who had stolen his horse, and that, without betraying that he had ever seen them before they stole his horse and tied him up. He even knew where they were confined in a little room in one corner of a straw and hay barn, and he had concocted in his mind a plan of revenge worthy of a fiend.

All he ached for was a chance to let them know who worked up the plot. Yet he feared if he went there with any of the men Croppy would let out all he knew about him, and then he would lose the sympathy he was receiving, if no worse. He might then be put under arrest himself, instead of getting off in safety with his recovered horse, as he hoped to.

He asked the agent if the men were safe who had stolen his horse.

"You bet!" was the answer. "They're ironed hand and foot, and we had to chain 'em apart to staples in the floor, or the crop-eared fellow would have pounded the other to death with his handcuffs. They're locked in, and there hangs the key. Besides there's a man watchin' the house most o' the time, though they couldn't get away if they wasn't watched. The keeper is in to supper now though, and I reckon I'll get a bite myself."

The boy looked at the key—the instant the agent went from the room the boy took the key in his teeth from the nail where it had hung, for he could do nothing with his bandaged hands. He hurried across the room and dropped the key among some rubbish near the fireplace.

Then, his pipe in his mouth still, he hurried out, and in a few seconds was in the barn where the two men were confined.

No one was there to guard the door. He hurried in and called out:

"Croppy! Oh, Croppy!"

"Who calls me—speak—is it a friend?" cried the ruffian, from the room in the corner.

"That depends. It's me, Croppy! Don't you know my voice?"

"It sounds like Benjy, the Kid!"

"It is, old hoss! How d'ye like it?"

"How did you ever get away?" growled Croppy.

"Burned myself oosel! I'm game, I am, and pretty well cooked, at that! How would you like a good scorching?"

"Oh, Jeremiah! What do you mean?"

"You'll know, you crop-eared cuss, in about three minutes. You an' your tenderfoot pard, there! I'm just a-shakin' out my pipeful o' fire in this mow o' dry straw here, and when I blow it into a blaze you'll have light enough to see my face! You needn't holler! There's nobody near—the men are all in to supper! They can't hear you! Now—look at me!"

Even as he spoke the blazing straw revealed his white face and snakelike eyes to the doomed men.

CHAPTER XXXV. A TERRIBLE REVENGE.

As the blaze rose, the two men, chained and ironed, unable to move a yard, saw they were

doomed unless helped out of there in a few minutes—even seconds of delay were death!

A fiendish laugh broke from the lips of Benjy, the Kid, as he shook his crippled hands at the two villains and rushed back to the station.

"MURDER! FIRE! Oh, save us!" screamed the men.

No one heard the heart-rending cries who could render aid. Fearfully fast the dry straw and hay blazed up, and the boy who had started the flames got inside the sitting-room of the station before any one came in to know that he had been absent.

He could hear the fearful yells for help. He knew the agony of the men as the hot flames and stifling smoke crept in on them, and he could have danced in glee but for attracting notice which would have betrayed his hand in the work.

The flame rose high, and the whole structure was like a furnace when it became known in the station that it was on fire.

One or two fearful shrieks were heard from the miserable men inside when the station-men got out, but then all was still there except the crackling and the roaring of the fire when these men rushed toward the building.

Fortunately it was isolated from the other station buildings and the fire did not spread beyond it. But in a few minutes only ashes and charred boards told that a structure had been there and that two human beings had perished in the flames.

How it was fired was a mystery to all. The station agent thought the men must have done it trying to light a pipe. Others said the Almighty had done it to punish them as murderers. Others said it was a judgment come upon them for robbing that "poor orfin" and leaving him bound to starve and die.

He rather "joined in" on that idea.

No one for a moment suspected him. His crippled hands were bound up in large bandages bigger than boxing-gloves. He could not even feed himself. And while the men were at supper he had been lying down on a lounge kept in a corner for the stage-drivers to rest on when they came in from a trip. At least he said so, and who could help believing a poor crippled "orfin."

Well, the work was done, and the murderous twain were out of the way. Only two men regretted it. They were the guards who were to have two dollars and a half a day for watching the manacled villains while the officer who arrested them was absent. It would have been a soft job for them, since they were under company pay besides as stablemen.

That night Benjy the Kid slept in spite of his sufferings. His hate had been gorged in the terrible punishment of his two enemies. And he knew, though crippled for life, he would be the hero of Salvation Hall. Alone he had tracked down the two deserters and inflicted the penalty prescribed by Clare, his chief, on all deserters. They had been burned to a crisp—"burned alive." They could make no revelations now, and their fate would be a terror to others. Clare would never, never forget the desperate courage of his "orfin" who had endured such terrible suffering in his service. Thenceforth if he could not help himself he would be helped.

In the morning, after having his hands redressed and being helped to all he could eat and drink, the boy begged to have his horse restored to him and to be put in the saddle so he could ride home to his aunt. The horse, he said, knew the way, and would carry him safe, and he could have the reins fast above his wrists to his arms so if the beast did swerve from the course he could keep him in it.

The agent consented, and the station men raised quite a purse among them and put it in the boy's pocket so he could hire a doctor when he got back to his aunt's.

So the "poor orfin" found himself, but for his crippled hands, better off than when he came in footsore and half-dead.

As soon as he was well clear of the station that morning he struck a bee-line across country for Salvation Hall and urged his well-fed and well-rested horse to its best speed.

Before night he fell in with some scouts—the same who had struck the track of the fugitives and lost it again and they took him under care and aided him on his journey back.

All were so glad the villain deserters had met their fate, which, by the way, had been attested by the station agent in a letter to the "poor orfin's" aunt. Benjy had asked it, for he said he was afraid his aunt wouldn't believe such a story, but as she was religious, she would when the agent wrote what a "judgment" had come upon the men who had been so cruel to him.

When the scouts with the boy reached Salvation Hall, and Clare received the report, he was wild with joy. Thenceforth, as long as he lived, he told the "Kid" he should be the pensioned Pet of the Band—cared for and nursed, fed, clothed, and have every luxury that could be had, for the good work he had done and the suffering he had endured.

For in spite of all that could be done, the boy was completely crippled for life. Every chord and muscle at his wrists rotted away and mortification setting in, the surgeon of the band

had to take off both arms half-way up to the elbow.

If the boy had any conscience and even thought of his parents in their far-away home, he could say in truth and grieving of spirit—"the way of the transgressor is hard."

As Omaha Charley had not made the boy a confidant in his plans, the latter could only report that he had overtaken him and that he heard him say to his men he would give them all the work they wanted inside of twenty-four hours.

He had headed off southeast while the Kid had wisely gone on a scout himself, which had he not done, would have allowed the deserters to get off unpunished, since their stealing his horse and leaving him to die had led directly to their own terrible end.

And now—we must look elsewhere and see what our other people are doing.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE MAN FROM PIKE.

"HEV any o' you 'uns seen any o' dad's mules 'round har? They've done gone an' strayed, the hull durned cahoot on 'em, an' we can't stir a waggin till they're found!"

He hailed from "Old Pike" in Missouri. And he looked it, as he strode into Sweetwater Station afoot, his butternut clothes all dust, mud nearly to the tops of his cowhide boots, and his long yellow hair sticking out from under his flop-rimmed hat like singed flax. He carried no weapon except an old black-jack whip—that is—in sight.

"Where are your wagons and when did your mules get away?" asked the agent, half-inclined to laugh, the young fellow looked so forlorn.

"The waggins an' dad an' mam and sister Jule are down the creek more'n an hour trot for legs like mine, an' they're all three swearin' mad, 'cos we can't get up an' git till them d'rotted mules are found? Sure they're not among yourn?"

"Go and look for yourself. I've seen no strange mules or horses either!"

"Thankee! Haven't got a little corn-juice you'd trade for a plug o' tobacco—rale good, we raised it back in Pike!"

"Go in and get a drink if you want it—never mind the tobacco!"

"Thankee! Wish dad was here. He's powerful fond o' corn-juice an' we've run dry!"

The fellow went in and swallowed a five-finger glass of whisky and then came out and went on looking for his mules.

He poked about everywhere in stables and corrals, talking about them "muels." They were lean, lop-eared and long-legged, he said, an' cusses to go when they got a-going.

And then he'd crack his black-jack as if he was starting them.

He had gone all over the station, even out the soldier's dug-out, but got no track of his mules.

He brought to at last in front of Old Jake Limbertoes's camp with the same question—long-drawn out:

"Hev'n't seen no muels round loose, hev you, dad?"

"None but my own," said Jake, coolly.

He didn't like the appellation—"dad"—from such a source.

"Gosh! That 'are gal o' yourn is a stunner. Beats our Jule, by snickers—she does!"

"Girls are not mules—look for your mules an' get away from my camp!" said Old Jake, angrily, for the fellow was staring open-mouthed at Libbie.

"Sho! You nee'n't r'ile 'cause a feller has got eyes an' can't help seein'. Got any corn-juice ter sell? I'd like a pint."

"I don't keep whisky."

"That's wonderful. Corn-juice is good to trade on! Good-day, old hard-shell!"

And the greenhorn strode back to the station.

"Say," said he to the storekeeper, "I've got a half-dollar with a hole in it—let me have a pint o' corn-juice for it. It's all the money I've got, by snickers it is! Dad's that mean he never shells out 'cos I won't be twenty-one till 'tater-bug time!"

"Yes—got a bottle?" replied the storekeeper.

"No—one o' them d'rotted muels kicked up ahind and broke the last one we-'uns had. Dad swore—he did, by snickers, for there war a drink o' corn-juice left when 'twas broke."

"It was hard. I suppose milk is scarce in your crowd!"

"No—we got a ceow! Jule has it yoked to a jack ahead o' the muels in her waggin. The jack is a daisy, he is—she named him arter a puke she used ter know in Pike—Clarence Coon."

"Well, here is your corn-juice!"

"Thankee! Thar's your half-dollar. Sorry it's got a hole in it—mam gi'n it to me to keep 'cos she said Jule cut her teeth on it—but me an' dad like corn-juice more'n money!"

"How old is Jule?" asked one of the drivers, laughing.

"Sixteen, next corn-shuckin' time, weighs nigh onto two hundred I reckon, and when she gits up peert she's a daisy, she is, by snickers!"

"I'd like to see her—but not inside my stage if she's that hefty!"

"You'd ha' seen us all 'fore now if the d'rotted

muels hadn't gone 'stray! I must be a-goin', or dad'll be arter me instead o' the muels!"

And he started off down the road as if going to where "dad and mam and Jule" vegetated.

The last seen of him by the station men was where the road took a curve two or three hundred yards down-stream. He had the bottle to his mouth and was undoubtedly sucking out his share of corn-juice.

Had he been followed a mile by the station agent, he would have been seen to quicken his gait and turning off the road westerly to make for a grove of thick scrubby trees.

Entering that, he remained only a few minutes, and when he came out he led a large and powerful horse whose glossy coat shone like satin.

To his back a rifle was slung, and in front of the saddle the butts of two revolvers showed up from the holsters.

Patting the arched neck of the handsome beast, the "representative from Pike" spoke caressingly:

"Steady, Mourner—steady! We've got a three-hour run ahead of us now and we must make it before dark if we can!"

The dialect of Pike had suddenly been improved upon.

Springing into the saddle the rider gave his horse the rein—it needed no spur—and in a long, swinging gallop headed for some dark, well-wooded hills to the westward, where thirty pairs of eager eyes were looking for him and impatiently a reckless leader waited for his report.

For this man was a spy from Omaha Charley, and his two-hundred-pound sister a myth.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE SPY'S RETURN.

CAMPED in a thick bit of woods, at the foot of a rocky hill, with high cliffs behind them, a splendid stream of clean water in front and a glade of sweet grass all-sufficient for their horses close at hand, the men under Omaha Charley were as happy as such ruffians could be.

Bear-Claw had killed a buffalo-calf and an elk, close to camp, and they had all the fresh meat they could cook.

Faro Ben had brought a half-dozen packs of cards along, and knowing the danger of cheating men who shot at a look, much less a word, he tried no trickery, and a half-dozen games were on hand at a time.

Omaha Charley did not play. He had something else to think of. As we said once before, using his own words, he had never been a "woman's man."

But the weird beauty of his captive, her nerve, and lastly her desperate courage had worked a wonderful change upon him. He thought of her by day—he dreamed of her at night. With the greed of all men in his line, he wanted her fortune. But he also wanted her. He was at last in love.

And, he thought, could he only win her love, he would leave his wild life, go to some far-off land and live for her and happiness. He could be gentle when he tried—he was not ill-looking, by many would have been called handsome. Not *dudishly* pretty, but manly and bold-looking, one to win on the heart of a true woman where he had a chance.

Half the time since Missouri Mike, his spy, had been gone he had wandered about the camp, and when it began to be near time for him to return, he went on a ledge which overlooked the route by which he would come and watched for him.

At last, far away, a mere speck in the distance, he got a glimpse of a man and horse. Hastening to where his horse was picketed at grass, he drew the line, and coiling it up, without waiting to saddle and bridle, sprung on the back of Satan and rode off to meet his messenger.

He met him more than a mile from camp, though Mike was coming full speed—all the faster when he knew the eye of his leader was upon him.

"Well, Mike, how did you get along?" he asked, as he reined up beside his spy, who had brought his foam-covered horse to a walk.

"First chop and no bones in it, Cap?" was the ready answer.

"Did you see the lady?"

"You bet I did, Cap! Isn't she a stunner! A six-horse team, thorough-bred and a trick horse thrown in. A whole circus by herself!"

"She was in camp?"

"Yes, Cap, with an old man. He was cross as blazes!"

"Nobody there but the usual station men?"

"No, Cap, exceptin' seven or eight soldiers a-playin' cards up at their dug-out. I asked 'em if they'd seen my stray muels and they told me clubs were trumps, and I'd find it out if I didn't to the right about march! I guess 'twas the sergeant that growled, and he'd been losing, for I see money on the bench between 'em!"

"No young Pony Express Rider fooling around the girl?"

"No, Cap. Not a soul at their camp but them two. There was no Pony Express in while I was there!"

"All right, Mike! You've earned an extra double eagle and here it is!"

"Thankee, cap'n. Will you have a taste o'

corn-juice? It's first chop an' some bones in it when it's shook up!"

"No, thank you, Mike. I've got to be sick when spirits pass my lips. I don't believe in them except as medicine, and not much then. Did you make the ride in, in three hours?"

"Yes, Cap, just about that, and a little less in coming back!"

"Can we get there easy in the night?"

"Not easy—it's scrubby and up an' down, an' lots o' prairie-dog holes to look out for. But it can be did, cap'n—we'll hev to go slow, though."

"We will start early and go slow so as to surprise them just before the break of day. It will be safest for the men—for I don't want to exchange a shot if it can be helped."

"If they do fight, it will be their loss, for I'll not leave a man alive to tell the tale!"

"That's doctrine, Cap, and I believe in it. You'd have laughed to see how they swallowed my yarns about dad and the "muels" that hev got strayed off. I did old Pike county proud, you bet!"

"I've no doubt of it, Mike. You are the best mimic in the band!"

By this time they were at the camp.

"Boys, close up your games, groom your horses well and get an early supper. Look well to your arms; we pull out of here a little before midnight."

These orders from Omaha Charley set the men all astir. They knew "business" was ahead and they "flew in" to get ready.

Faro Ben was the only one who growled. He had a streak of luck and was making money on a square game.

Bear-Claw was happy. He was made so much of by the leader, who to him was a model brave.

He was the guide and hunter for the gang, both positions of the utmost importance in a party like that.

An hour was occupied briskly by the men on their horses, and when their coats shone like satin they were watered and roped out to grass while the men got supper. It was dark before that was cooked, but the great camp-fire made everything light as day inside the camp.

Covered by the thick grove in front and the impassable cliffs in the rear, the fires could not be seen at any distance outside, so the bandits took no care about them.

After supper, the next two or three hours were spent in cleaning arms and looking to saddles and cinches—bridles and lariats.

Then came the stern order:

"Mount and follow me!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

NEWS-BEARERS.

IT was late at night when Mr. Normand and his party reached the station where young Cody belonged, on the down run.

He had come in that afternoon tired and not very well. On the night when he jumped into the ice-cold river to help Libbie he had taken a fearful cold and had not really seen a thoroughly well day since. Yet he had stuck to his duty and had run his route. He was in bed when the party arrived and put their horses out to feed. But the moment Frank Powell told him who they were and where they wanted to go, he rose and dressed and went to meet Mr. Normand.

The latter was wonderfully impressed with the appearance and manner of the young man.

"You are very young for a hero!" he said.

"Courage and skill to an extraordinary degree must have been requisite when you rescued Lord Glenarvon's daughter!"

"A little sand and tough riding, sir—nothing more!" said Will, blushing.

"Sand?" said Mr. Normand, with a tone of inquiry.

"Yes, sir—I believe you Englishmen call it *pluck*. We got her, my mates and me, and that is all there is of it!"

"Not all, my dear young sir—not all, by great odds. You shall be richly and gratefully rewarded!"

"Dry up right there!" said Cody, whose illness made him petulant. "We Americans don't make money that way. If we do a good act, we do it because it is right. What comes from our hearts don't strike into our pockets!"

"I really beg your pardon. I have no wish to hurt your feelings. I knew not how to express my gratitude for your zeal and courage. I've never seen the young lady, but your young friend Mr. Powell speaks extravagantly of her beauty and grace."

"Yes, Frank can't be anything without he is extravagant. But she's a daisy, for all that. Is it true she'll be very rich?"

"It is true she is—not will be, if she is proved to be the lady I am looking for!"

"Well, I'm right glad of it. She is good and smart and money will not spoil her. As to the proof you speak of, Old Jake Limbertoes has her mother's marriage-certificate, another proving the birth and christening of the child, besides his own evidence, having been with the mother when she died and cared for the child ever since!"

"It is enough and more than enough!" said Mr. Normand. "Had not the agent of his lord-

ship been foully murdered, as we are now assured—poisoned in Chicago—the young lady would have seen her father while he lived. When he knew his end was approaching, slowly but surely, remorse for his long neglect of those he once loved filled his heart. He had learned of the death of his wife, but knew his child lived and sent this agent to find and bring her back to him. The agent, a lawyer named Wilson, was well provided with money, and it no doubt was that which cost him his life. But we have the murderer in irons and our return will carry him to Chicago, where his own admissions will hang him!"

"Good! And now, gentlemen, if you'll excuse me, I'll have some coffee made and a bite to eat put upon the table. For you'll go on as soon as your horses are fed and rested."

"Yes—can you not go with us?"

"Of course I can and will. There's an extra rider here who can take my turn on the route. I want to see how Libbie takes the news. She would hardly believe it when I showed her the papers."

"She will not doubt when I lay before her a copy of the will and furnish all the ready money she wants—it being her own."

An hour or two was spent at the supper-table and in seeing the horses well groomed and ready for a brisk ride, for the party were to move on when the morning star rose, and Cody said they could make the ten miles in an hour and a half without any trouble.

He had roused up stablemen to see to the horses, and at the time ordered they were saddled, bridled and led to the door ready for the mount.

Will had an extra pony of his own, and he and Frank Powell took the lead as they started on.

Soon there was a change in places. Frank fell back to talk with Mr. Normand, and Duncan Young, the detective, rode up beside young Cody.

"Do the road-agents ever bother your Pony Express?" asked the officer.

"Not often! When the line first opened, they laid out two or three of the boys, but when they found no coin in the mail-bag, nothing but letters and papers they couldn't use—they let us alone. They go for the stages though when there's passengers and treasure-boxes on."

"So we often hear. I was told down the road that you and your friend there shot some up the road, not long ago."

"Yes, sir; we tumbled over four of 'em. But I've no idea they meant robbery. I think they were on the road to cover another party, for it was on the very night the young lady was carried off that this occurred. I'll show you the place when we get to it—a shady, narrow bit of road as dark as pitch at nightfall."

"You say you shot four—how could you cover them in the dark?"

"By their voices and the hold they had on our bridles. I shot the last one by the flash of his pistol. It was all over in a second—it had to be quick work on one side or the other."

"I should say so! You are very young to be on the hire."

"Not so very. I am seventeen—going for eighteen. I drove a freight team on this trail over five years ago."

"I've had to stir gravel ever since I was a little kid to help my mother and sisters along. Father was killed in Kansas!"

"Yes—by the Quantrell gang—I know all the particulars."

"Did you know I wiped one of 'em out at St. Joe?"

"Yes; I heard of it. He boasted how many men he had killed in Kansas—you heard him, and when your father's name was mentioned, got the drop on him, told him who you were and dropped him in his tracks!"

"That's so!" said Will. "How did you come to hit so near the truth of the story?"

"I was there next day. I was after the very man you shot for murder and robbery. You saved me some trouble, though I didn't get the reward that was up for him."

"Neither did I—for I left St. Joe that night. The fellow had lots of friends sneaking around and I didn't want a knife in my back!"

"You were right—Hark—I thought I heard a gun!"

CHAPTER XXXIX.

ON THE ALERT.

"FATHER—that man isn't the greenhorn he pretends to be!" said Libbie, when the young fellow from Pike left, after his inquiries about mules.

"I guess he's sharp enough to know hot water from cold!" said the old man carelessly, throwing the bridle he had just mended to one side.

Libbie looked thoughtful, but said no more until she saw the greenhorn come out of the station with a bottle in his hand. She watched him as he strode away, going very slowly at first, but increasing his stride as he supposed himself beyond observation.

Then a sudden idea seemed to strike her. Her pony was picketed a few rods away. Going out to the spot she unfastened the animal, and without waiting for bridle or saddle leaped on its

back and with the lariat guided it in the direction the "Pike county" man had gone.

She reached a bend in the road where he had last been seen taking a drink from his bottle, and through a fringe of bushes saw him running swiftly over the prairie, for he had left the road.

Instantly dismounting, she fastened her pony there and swept into the bushes where she could observe his motions and yet be unseen.

He ran to a thick grove of bushy trees near a mile back, and she crept on toward it fast as she could, stooping low in the bushes through which she passed.

She stopped suddenly when she saw him come out, leading a large horse, saddled, bridled, ready for mounting. The man now had a rifle slung at his back, and she saw pistol-holsters on the front of the saddle.

"A spy!" she said, as the man sprung into the saddle with the ease and grace of a cavalryman.

She dared not move, lest he should see her, for he was scarce a quarter of a mile away. But in a minute he headed his horse away in the direction of some hills far off to the west and went out of sight at a gallop.

Then she hurried back to her pony, sprung on its back, and ran it at full speed to the station. Calling the agent out she said:

"Do you know who that yellow-haired man was that has been inspecting everything about the station?" she asked. "I saw him up at the dug-out over at your stables, and at last coming out of here with a bottle in his hand."

"Oh, yes," said the agent, carelessly, "oh, yes, Miss Libbie—he was a poor greeny from the backwoods of Missouri, looking for stray mules. His father is in camp down the stream. You should have heard him describe his sister Jule—a two-hundred-pound specimen of beauty!"

"Mr. Cameron—you have been deceived. The fellow was a spy and not half as green as he acted. I told my father so after he left our camp over there, and when he went out of sight I got on my pony and followed him!"

"Ah—what did you discover, Miss Libbie?"

"When I got to the second turn of the road half a mile below, I saw through the bushes that he had left the road and was running as fast as he could go to the cedar swamp."

"I left my pony and crept half-way to it through the bushes. I had the revolver which I always carry and wasn't a bit afraid, but I stooped so low he couldn't see me."

"He was in the swamp or grove only two or three minutes and came out leading a splendid horse. He had a rifle at his back and there were holsters on his saddle."

"He jumped into that saddle without even putting his foot in the stirrup, and then rode off toward the Black Hills at a swift gait!"

"Mercy on me! He must have been a spy. I'll send a man right down the road to see if there is any campers there that have lost mules—and if there isn't, we'll know there's mischief brewing!"

"Yes—just as there was when that pretended route inspector made you move our camp out just where he wanted it, beyond protection!"

"Oh, Miss Libbie, you will never forget that?"

"Hardly—but what are you going to do? Get ready to defend the place, if attacked, or not? If not, father and I will mount our horses and ride to a station where the men keep some lookout!"

"Miss Libbie, you need not move from here. I will have every man under arms and have the soldiers leave their dug-out and come down here to the station. We'll put out sentinels and take every precaution. You and your father shall have my two private rooms, and then you shall see if I'm caught careless again!"

"That sounds right, Mr. Cameron. Your very carelessness of to-day in not detecting that fellow will aid us if an attack is intended, by making them think you can be surprised!"

"Will you ride up to the dug-out, miss, as you are mounted, and ask the sergeant to come here? Do not tell him what for—but say it is special and he'll come."

Libbie bowed her lovely head in assent and rode off.

"Father," she said, as she passed "Old Jake's" camp, "get our arms all loaded—I've some news for you when I return!"

The agent meantime sent a fast rider down the road to see if there were any campers near by who had lost mules.

When the sergeant came to the station, the agent took him to his private room, gave him a glass of extra Bourbon such as he kept for private use, and told him what he had learned and what he feared—another attack from outlaws. He asked the sergeant to transfer his men and arms to the station for the night.

"Can't leave the fort! 'Gainst orders!" said the old soldier, bluntly.

He always called the dug-out a fort.

"But what good can you do us, if we are attacked away down here?"

"Cover your left flank with our fire!" said the soldier, calmly.

"You're no coward, sergeant!"

"Reckon not!"

"But you'd stay in your infernal hole up there while we are shot down or burned out!"

"If 'twas orders, yes! If 'twas my will, NO!" said the sergeant, who never wasted a word.

"Can't you compromise? Say, send us down half your men under the corporal and hold your fort yourself with the rest?"

"Yes. Got no orders against that. I'll send him after roll-call—at sunset, with four men!"

"Thank you, sergeant. Here—join me in another drop of Kentucky!"

"It's good! Wouldn't mind having a bottle for medicine. We killed a snake in our dug-out this morning!"

"A poisonous snake?"

"Yes—a rattler, nine rattles and a button. Good-day!"

The sergeant saluted, wheeled and was gone in a second.

The agent now mustered his men. Telling them he suspected danger he made every man take arms—the company kept plenty at every station—see that they were in order, fit ammunition, and get ready for defense.

There were only thirteen men now at the station besides the agent. Old Jake would make one more. The corporal and his men would increase the force, till all told would be twenty besides the young lady.

"We can hold our own," said the agent, as he counted up how many he would have.

And the men, remembering the fate of their former comrades, went cheerfully to work to prepare for defense.

Libbie and her father came over after an early supper at their camp.

The man who had been sent down the road on his return reported no campers or signs of a camp anywhere near for four or five miles below. On that two sentinels were put out to keep a lookout till dark a full half-mile from the station.

At dark they were to come in and take post near the station.

The old corporal was at the station at sunset. On reporting, the agent made him very happy.

First he asked him to "take a little" for his better health in the night air coming on.

Second, and to him most flattering, as a non-commissioned officer of the regular army, he was asked to take command at the station.

"You have so much experience, you know!" said the agent.

"I'll prove it!" said the corporal, at once ordering every man in the station to fall in for inspection of arms.

Carefully he looked at every weapon, tried the locks, saw that they worked right and that each man had plenty of ammunition.

Then he went out to inspect the sentinels—two in number—and seeing their arms in order to give instructions as to their duty, also to issue a countersign.

On his return he posted the men inside the stout, heavily-planked building. Keeping a reserve in the main room, he scattered others to the different sides of the house, where loop-holes for musketry had been made, and they were none of them to leave post without order.

To Libbie and her father he said:

"You two had better go to bed and rest. You shall be called if an alarm is heard!"

"I'm a man, corporal, if I be old, and able to do a man's duty. I'm here to fight if any pesky robbers show their 'tarnal faces!" said Jake Limbertoes.

"And, corporal, my brave friend," added Libbie, "you saw me get rid of two such enemies in a hurry not long ago!"

"Yes, ma'am, I did, and it was a neat action, ma'am! No soldier in the army could have done better, if so well!"

"I had then only one double-barreled pistol. Now, see"—pointing to her belt—"I wear a good revolver and a knife—pre-ens from brave Will Cody, and I know how to use them. I shall aid you in defense of our lives if we are attacked, and I feel sure you will be!"

"By whom—have you an idea, ma'am?"

"Yes—by that dreadful Omaha Charley. He will do it to take revenge for the comrades he has lost. And that vile Englishman who plotted to steal me away before may be in the party, with the same intentions yet. I have a message for him if he comes. He is wanted in the land of evil spirits, and his passport is here!"

She touched her revolver.

"Brave little lady. You ought to be a general's wife."

The corporal could not comprehend a greater honor than that which he named.

He now ordered every light put out, so that no foe from outside would have any advantage over those within.

One door he kept unlocked so he could visit the sentinels. To the relief of the latter he would himself attend, and to keep them alert they were changed every hour. All doors but that one were secured. All inside were told, if conversing, to speak in whispers, so the least strange sound could be noticed, no matter where it came from.

Slowly to the watchers the night grew upon them hour by hour. The clock in the waiting-room struck eleven, twelve, and then hour by hour morning crept along.

"I don't believe we'll be disturbed to-night, or

rather this morning!" said the agent, when he heard the clock strike three. "I've half a mind to take a nap."

"They came just before daybreak upon us. For mercy's sake don't think of sleep now, if you're a man!" said Libbie.

"I'll try not to, little lady," was the answer. "If you'll talk to me I'll be wide awake."

"Hush!" said the corporal. He came in almost breathless. "I heard the tramp of horses—a body of horsemen down the road when I changed sentinels just now. I've moved the sentries close up, where we can receive them inside the house if we are suddenly attacked. They are not to hail until the enemy, if it is an enemy, are very close. Then our own fire will be effective. Ah!—do you hear?"

A sound as of a small body of men moving at a trot away down by the river, but past the station, was heard.

"They're going to try to surprise the 'dug-out,'" whispered the corporal.

"I hear other horsemen back of the station," reported one of the soldiers to the corporal.

"They must be many—they'll try to surround us, I reckon!" said the agent.

He was not sleepy now.

"Hush! There are men on foot close by. Did you hear that? One stumbled and fell I think—I heard a muttered curse," said the corporal. "Ready—every man—ready!"

"Halt! Who comesthere?" cried a clear voice, that of one of the soldiers, and the click of his gun-lock accompanied his words.

A strange sound, like the leap of a wild beast, fell on the ears of those within—then a groan, and the gun of the sentinel fell against the house as it was fired.

CHAPTER XL.

BESIEGED.

"QUICK! Sentinels all in!" cried the corporal, as the shot echoed loud over the scene.

One man only staggered in—the other fell dead at the threshold, and a fiendish yell rung through the air.

"It is the cry of an Indian," said the corporal.

"One acts as a guide for the outlaw leader," said Libbie.

All was still for a moment. The corporal was a brave man, but he knew not what foes were about him. He trembled from suspense, not fear.

"Fire wherever you see a form!" he said, in a low, firm tone. "Don't waste a shot. If you see a flash fire at that."

A laugh—a wild, horrible laugh was heard near by. Then a drawling voice cried out, mockingly:

"Seen any o' dad's muels driftin' 'round, strangers—lop-eared an' long-legged cusses—jest like me?"

"The spy!" gasped Libbie.

"Sure as life. What cussed fools we were," said the agent.

A volley of musketry was heard up the stream.

"They've tried to surprise the sergeant, but he is too much for 'em. Fire, every other man. We may hit some of 'em, and the sergeant will know we're awake at any rate!" cried the corporal.

A sharp volley rattled from each side of the house.

Again that horrible mocking laugh was heard.

"Show yourselves, you cowardly wretches!" cried the corporal, mad because his fire was not returned.

"You'll see us soon enough!" cried the same shrill voice. "Wait till the cap'n comes back from his little visit up the road."

"He is here! Keep cover, men, I have something to say."

"It is Omaha Charley—I know his hateful voice," cried Libbie, forgetting herself, and speaking so loud she was overheard.

"Yes—it is me, charming rose of prairie-land. I went to your tent to call on you, and found out you were absent. I am sorry—I want to see you. You left me so unceremoniously when we parted last, I had not time to say half I wanted to. Will you grant me an interview now?"

"Yes—come in here! Breakfast is ready. Cold lead and sharp steel on the bill of fare!" cried the spirited girl.

"I'll be there sooner than your friends will want me, little beauty. But if you'll be wise and come out here yourself no harm shall befall them."

"Why do you want to see me?"

"To tell you that I love you—to propose an honorable marriage. That effected—I will not offer harm to person or property here or elsewhere on the road!"

"Love in a murdering robber's heart! Marriage to a thieving outlaw! Fiend, begone, or—do me one favor!"

"Name it, and in spite of your abuse I'll grant it!"

"Just step forward where I can see your handsome form in the starlight!"

"So your friends can shoot me down?"

"No—no, I pledge my life no man shall fire a shot at you!"

Without a second thought the outlaw stepped from the cover—a huge water-tank—which had sheltered him.

Crack—crack—CRACK!

Three sharp reports of a small revolver rung on the air, and with a wild leap and a cry of pain the outlaw regained his cover.

"Curse it—I'm shot! Is that the way you keep promises?" he groaned.

"Yes—I told you no man should fire on you! I did the shooting, my gentle cavalier. The rose has thorns, you know!"

"I am hit, but not so bad it can't be cured, and you, you little devil, shall be my nurse. Men—don't fire a shot till you can see whom to hit. Remember, in no case is harm to come to that girl, not even should she kill me!"

"Which I will, if I get another chance. I fired too quick before!" cried Libbie.

"Is all ready, Bear-Claw?" asked the leader.

"Yes! him all right. Four side fix!" replied the shrill voice of the Indian.

"Once again—I call on all inside that house to surrender!" cried the outlaw. "You are surrounded by a band of desperate men. Once their blood is up, they'll know no mercy. I know your numbers to a man. One of your men lies dead and scalped at the door. Surrender and I will spare every life!"

"Soldiers of the United States army never surrender!" cried the corporal, boldly. "That's your answer. I'm in command here!"

"Then—your blood be on your own heads. Men—shoot down every man you see, but harm not that woman. She is mine. Light the bon-fire!"

The occupants of the house heard the order and looked to see some great fire started outside.

For a few seconds they did not divine the infernal cruelty of the man.

But then a crackling noise was heard close to them—a faint light shone on trees, the tank and outbuildings, but not an outlaw was in sight.

"Heaven have mercy on us! They've fired the house on every side!" shouted the agent.

For two or three minutes all inside seemed palsied with terror. And in that time the flames shot up bright and high and they saw that no effort from inside could stay the flames.

"There is but one choice—we will not roast here like rats in a burning barn—if we must die—we'll die fighting. Throw open the doors and follow me!"

It was the heroic corporal who uttered these words.

Fixing his bayonet even while he spoke, he sprung forward to lead the way.

"Hold! Hold!" cried Libbie—"let me lead; they will not fire on me; once out on fair ground you'll stand some chance with the wretches."

"No—no! Me first!" shouted Old Jake, and he was in the doorway as it flew open.

A volley was fired from the darkness outside, and poor Old Jake fell over the corpse of the sentinel at the door, and the corporal staggered out badly hit and fell over him.

"Cowards! You've murdered my father!" shrieked Libbie, as she sprung to Old Jake's side and dragged him from the burning house.

Now, shooting, shrieking and yelling was heard on every side, for as each man showed his form in the light of the blazing house he was shot down by the concealed bandits.

"Oh, father—father, are you dead?" cried the wretched girl, as with almost superhuman strength she drew that old man, bleeding from several wounds, away from the fiery furnace, which now glowed and crackled from ground to roof.

"Never mind him—come with me!" cried a man, grasping her around the slender waist and striving to break her hold loose from about the old man's neck.

"Ah—is it you? Die—dog that you are!" she cried, and for a second she released her grasp upon that bleeding form, and drawing the knife from her belt drove it to the hilt in the body of the man who had seized her!

"Curse it—she's knifed me!" he screamed, and then as she saw in the firelight a ghastly face seamed with agony, she knew it was not Omaha Charley she had cut down, though she thought so when she struck the blow.

His blood in hot streams flew all over her, and fainting, she fell again upon the body of poor Old Jake.

"Boys—the work is done. Mount and away—as soon as I am up! Bear-Claw, bring along my prize—see, she has fainted!"

The order was heard, though the captain's voice was weak. He had been lifted on his horse by Mike and the Indian, for he bled badly from three wounds, though he tried to stop the flow of blood.

"Shall we leave Faro Ben? He is down with a knife through and through his body!" cried one of the men.

"Yes—we can't carry dead men, or dying ones either. Bring his horse; we'll need that."

All we have described did not take over half an hour to execute after the alarm was given.

At his chieftain's order, Bear-Claw raised the now unconscious form of poor Libbie, and first

putting her half-emptied pistol in his own belt, threw her limp figure across his horse and sprang up behind it.

"Make a detour and avoid fire from the dug-out, then up the road at full speed. Hurrah for Utah now and a land where we'll find friends and treasure!" cried the leader.

A cheer, and the horsemen broke away from the light of the burning buildings, for now even the stables were on fire.

CHAPTER XLI.

A HARROWING SCENE.

"A gun? I didn't hear it! It might have been some animal jumped in the woods!" was the answer Will Cody made when the detective spoke.

"I might have been mistaken—how far is it now to the station where we are going?"

"Not over four miles—we'll be there by daylight, or a little after. Are you tired?"

"No—but I'm strangely nervous and anxious. I scarcely know why, but it seems as if some danger is hovering near."

"I reckon not, sir. Remember, I came over the road early yesterday and saw no sign—heard no news. Harney and Sumner are on the road above and below with troops, and Indians and outlaws always give the blue-coats plenty of room!"

"Ah! did you not hear that sound again? It is very far off, but the air is cold and clear—I surely heard guns!"

"I heard nothing. I've such a cold in my head I couldn't hear you if you were not close to me. Spur on—we'll make time!"

Using their spurs, the party of Mr. Normand, now led by Cody and the detective, went on at a sweeping gallop and soon passed the spot where Will and Powell laid out the quartette of road-agents.

Will was just pointing out the spot where he and Powell were called on to halt when a red glow was seen ahead and the detective cried out:

"Is it as near day as that? Is the sunrise reflecting on the sky?"

"Great Heaven, no!" cried Will. "It must be over an hour to daylight—it is fire—FIRE at the station. Ride, men, ride—I hear guns, too—ride—ride, or all we hope for is lost!"

And driving his spurs rowel-deep in the flanks of his pony he dashed on at its utmost speed. The rest were close up, some of the time one or other side by side, and no word was spoken.

Only the panting of the horses and the sharp clatter of their hoofs over the hard road was heard.

But ahead, rising in great, glowing tongues of flame, was proof enough that help was needed up the road.

No longer did the sound of fire-arms reach their ears, but they did not check their speed but rode madly on until their horses, trembling, hardly seemed to feel the spur.

Nearer and nearer.

"The station is gone—the stables too are ablaze; where—where can the men be?" shouted Cody, as his pony, almost used up, halted in front of the smoking timbers of the main building.

"Ah—there are men on the ground—there has been butchery here!" cried Mr. Normand, while Cody drove on his poor pony, crying out "Follow me!"

He headed for the tents of poor Old Jake Limbertoes.

Arriving there he leaped to the ground, rushed in, then staggered out, and as Mr. Normand came up, cried in a tone of utter despair:

"They've got her again, sir—she is gone—SHE IS GONE!"

And he wept like a baby.

Mr. Normand dismounted, lighted a wax taper, such as he had brought for camp use, and went into first one tent, then the other. There was no sign of disorder, no evidence of any struggle in either. Libbie's work lay where she had left it, on a little table that Will had made from an empty box he had found at the station.

"Let us go back where we saw those bodies!" said Mr. Normand. "These beds have not been slept in. Over there we may learn something!"

Cody did not reply, but leaving his tired pony where it stood, hurried back on foot to the station. He was closely followed by Mr. Normand.

The old valet and Mr. Young were dragging dead and dying men away from the terrible heat of burning timbers and hot embers. Bodies partly burned were too much in the fire for living man to reach them.

Powell was bending over two men who lay side by side near the water-tank. One was surely alive—the other breathed. Day was coming in the east, darkness was slowly passing from the earth.

"Don't stock the pack on me—rake in the checks—the game is yours!" groaned the man, whom Powell had turned over.

"Mercy! I know that knife! It is one I gave to Libbie!" cried Cody, as Powell withdrew a knife with an ivory hilt from the ghastly wound.

"Yes—an' the gal gave it to me, good and

strong!" gasped the man. "Tell 'em down in Omaha Faro Ben has closed his bank—but don't tell 'em a woman laid me out!"

"The girl—where—where is she?" cried Cody. "I'm dyin'—no use to lie—Omaha Charley has got her—you'll find her in Utah—ME in h—"

He never spoke again. The blood gushed from his mouth in a torrent, it was pouring from his wound—he choked—there was a slight struggle as if he tried to rise—then he fell back motionless.

"Who is this? He is breathing. Is he an outlaw?" asked Mr. Normand, raising the other man partly up.

"Oh, it is Old Jake—Libbie's father—all the father she has ever known. Oh, Frank—Frank, save him!" cried Cody.

"Give me some brandy, whisky, anything strong!" cried the young medical student. "His pulse flutters—life is low, very low!"

"The pack-mule was left away behind. We have none nearer!" cried the old valet, who looked to the stores.

"There he comes—at a trot; bring him here at once and get what we have!" cried Mr. Normand, as the mule, faithful to its duty, joined its road-mates.

While Powell was trying to restore poor Old Jake to consciousness, aided with trembling hands by Cody, Mr. Normand went over to where a man in United States uniform was sitting braced up against the water-tank, breathing very short, evidently sinking. He seemed to have been shot all to pieces, for his clothes were soaked in blood and it lay in a puddle at his feet.

"The ar—army dies, it don't sur—surrender!" he gasped.

"Who did this awful work?" asked the Englishman.

"Outlaws! Devils! The little lady shot the leader and killed that wretch. She beat the army—give me water!"

There was a faucet to the tank—water had been supplied when it rained from the roof of the station-house near. Jones drew some water, mixed it with brandy, and gave it to the dying man.

"Tell Sergeant Armstrong I did my—duty—and the army—"

The sentence was never finished. He died as he had lived—a brave man—the army in every thought.

Not three minutes later, the sergeant, coming from his "dug-out," stood over the body of his fallen comrade.

Tears rolled down the old soldier's cheeks, and as he tried to wipe them away he sobbed out:

"We've served three enlistments together—but he has orders to report above! I had rather it had been me!"

Now, as the only man who could tell who had done the work, and seemed able, the sergeant was questioned.

He told a simple, straightforward story. The station agent, fearing an attack, had asked him for all the men he could spare to aid in the defense of the station. He had sent his corporal and four men.

One lay dead and scalped close to the house. Another, recognized by his musket with the bayonet fixed, lay a heap of charred bones just inside where the door had been. Two more lay dead near the corporal—riddled with bullets.

Not a living man except poor Old Jake was left—some dying, who could not speak just as relief came up.

Poor old man. He was stripped, washed and four gun-shot wounds, two clear through the body, examined and dressed before he had life enough to speak.

Then—when almost a pint of pure old brandy had been given him, a spoonful at a time—recognizing Will Cody, he whispered:

"Find her, Will—she can't be—very far—"

"I will, old man, I will!" cried the young man, half-choked in agony.

The sergeant now asked if some one would not help him at dug-out. One of his men was killed through a loop-hole and another wounded badly.

The ruffians had crept in on him and fired a volley through his own ports before he knew they were near.

He returned it and they left for they could not have forced an entrance through the iron-lined door neither could they have burned him out. He saw the outlaws when they left and counted thirty by the light of the burning buildings. He saw the young lady carried on a horse before a man. He would have fired on them as they went had he not feared they would kill her.

In another hour, Old Jake, removed to his tent, could talk in low whispers to Mr. Norman. He had been told who he was.

"You'll get my girl back so I can see her before I die?" he said.

"We'll get her back and we're not going to let you die!" said Cody, who had returned from the dug-out.

"Only let me see her safe once more—then I'm ready to go!"

"Let him rest. It is his only chance!" said Powell in a tone of authority. "I will see to him—you men go and lay your plans! The lady must and shall be recovered!"

Tears started in Old Jake's eyes and he pressed the hand of the young man as hard as his feeble strength would permit.

"Frank is right. Come, gentlemen, outside, and we will see what we are to do, and do it quickly!" said Cody.

CHAPTER XLII.

ON THE TRAIL.

"Mr. Cody," said Mr. Normand, "you are young, but full of zeal and courage and you know the country. That poor girl must be rescued and that speedily. How can it be done?"

They three—the detective, Mr. Normand and Cody had gone a little way from the old man's camp, leaving Powell and Jones the valet to see to him.

"You ask me a conundrum!" said Will, gravely. "I know not how—I only know it must be done, if I go under in the work. We are but three—they are thirty well-armed, desperate men!"

"You don't count Powell in!" said the detective. "He is smart as chain lightning!"

"We cannot take him away from the care of poor Old Jake. Powell has read medicine two or three years and is a natural born surgeon. He must stay behind, also Jones, your valet. He is too old for the hardships and perils we must endure. For in this chase we can carry neither tent or baggage—only arms and ammunition must cumber our horses—even our provisions must be found as we go!"

"Do you think we three can cope with thirty?"

"Not by force. But I propose to send for help to follow us up, while I alone, or all three of us, take up that trail and follow it. We may get a chance, aided by Providence, to help her, even before we get help."

"Your courage makes you hopeful!" said Normand.

"My father had a motto," replied Cody. "It was this: 'Never despair! God will see you through!'"

"Yet he was shot down by ruffians!" said the detective.

"Yes—overpowered by numbers. But he thinned out their ranks before he went down, and he left a good name behind him. I'm going to keep it up if I can!"

"How can we send for help?" asked the Englishman. "We can spare neither man or horse!"

"The stage will be along soon, and the Pony Express will pass both ways. And if they're not cut off, I can soon get word to General Harney one way and to Colonel Sumner the other. Both will help us when they hear of this outrage. At every station we pass I'll find men who know me, and I'll get some volunteers. Were we but three, or if I had to go alone—that trail must not grow cold. It must be kept until she is safe. The robbers will not hurt her. They know there is a fortune behind her name, or they would not have twice carried her off. They are too wild and lawless—too utterly heartless to care for woman, for woman's sake!"

"Mr. Cody speaks sound sense," said the detective. "Live or die, I am with him!"

"And I!" added Normand.

Cody now went to the station corrals and let out what animals were there, so they could get grass and water. The animals in the stables, kept up for instant use when the stage or Express came in, had all been burned with the buildings.

In the corrals were kept a few for extra use, and these, with the animals belonging to his own party, Cody drove to water. Then, taking his companions up to the soldiers' "dug-out," Will got them a breakfast on Government fare.

The old sergeant did his best—but he was near broken-hearted. He was much attached to his comrades. Their lonely life made them all the dearer to each other.

Five of these were cold in death down at the station—one had just been buried there, and another was so badly wounded life only hung by a thread.

Out of a garrison of ten, himself included—six were dead and one was helpless—three, all told, fit for duty.

When the old soldier heard Will say they were going to follow the trail, he said:

"If I dared disobey orders and leave my post, how gladly would I go with you. I'd like to empty my cartridge-box among those cruel wretches."

When the stage from the West came in, the driver and passengers had a sad story to tell.

They had been met by the outlaws at the station above, where the bandits had helped themselves to provisions, forage and all the money they could get from the station men, killing none, because there was no resistance to their abuse or demands.

The outlaws had robbed the passengers—rifled the express-box and mail-bags, and then told them all to be thankful for their lives. They meant to clean the whole road.

"Did you see a female in the party?" asked Mr. Normand.

"Yes, sir," said one of the passengers. "She was sick, almost in hysterical convulsions, and finding by my medicine-case I was a physician,

the leader made me dress three wounds of his—extracting a ball from his shoulder—and prescribe for her. I did what I could for the poor lady, but she was terribly depressed, and I soon learned she was a captive. But they seemed to treat her well."

"A physician—why can't we hire him to stay here and attend to poor Old Jake and the soldier?" cried Cody. "That will give us Powell on the trail, and young as he is, no better shot or rider can be found on the plains."

"Will a thousand dollars be an inducement for you to remain here in care of two wounded men, while we raise men and pursue these murderous outlaws?" asked Mr. Normand, addressing the physician.

"It will indeed, sir—for the robbers stripped me of my last dollar, and would have taken my medicine-case and surgical instruments had not their chief been grateful for the relief I gave him, and forbidden it."

"Then that is settled, and in that tent you will find one patient and your quarters."

"Can't you hire us too? We've been cleaned of our last red," said one of two young men in the coach.

"Can you shoot well and sit a horse?" asked Normand.

"You bet—we've been on a California cattle-ranch for five years, and were going home to see our old folks, with all our wages along. Now we've got to begin over again somewhere."

"Name your own wages and join our party, and we'll help to get your money back."

"You are going after the outlaws?"

"Yes."

"Then we're with you for the war, if it takes all summer."

"That makes six," said Cody, brightening up. "And I'll get volunteers at the next station, too, you bet. We'll be off when I've written a letter to the superintendent below and another to General Harney."

So into Libbie's tent he hurried, while the driver gathered up loose horses and put on the harness so the stage could go on, wrote his letters, and when the stage rolled on to carry the sad news below it had three less passengers on the load.

To get arms for the new men was difficult, but out of Old Jake's tent one good gun and a pair of revolvers and from the dug-out a good U. S. rifle, Springfield make, was secured.

So, by a little after noon, six men with Cody as chief trailer were on the track of Omaha Charley and his murderous band.

Fresh horses for the new men and their own horses rested, placed the whole party in good condition for time.

Cody thoughtfully took Libbie's pony along, for he said:

"She was used to it, and would want it to come back on."

Normand was pleased, for this showed how confident of success the young hero felt.

There was no trouble in finding the trail or keeping it. The outlaws, confident in numbers and emboldened by success made no attempt to hide their tracks, but dashed on fearless and careless. No telegraphic wire could flash danger ahead and they held the road themselves, as the party saw only too soon, when the Pony Express Rider from the West was found dead beside his horse on the trail, his mail-pouch not even opened.

"The curses!" cried Cody. "They had no need to kill poor little Sam. He was the best boy on the route!"

They had no tools to bury him with, but they covered his body with brush and hurried on to the next station whence men could come to get it.

There they found the men as mad as men could be. Their wages had been recently paid, and every dollar and nearly all their stores were gone. The robbers swept everything clean as they went.

Here four more good men were enlisted for the chase and it was renewed with more hope and full speed.

One more station was reached, and there the same story was heard, only here two men who had resisted robbery were shot down as an example to the rest.

Inquiry showed that the leader of the outlaws, though badly wounded, was able to ride with the rest and better since his wounds had been dressed.

His sufferings made him ugly and petulant even with his own men. But so far their captive seemed to have been treated kindly, though she was overwhelmed with grief, charging the outlaws with having slain her father.

Two more recruits there volunteered to go on in the morning, for they had to lay over for the night—it was too dark to follow a trail which might leave the main road at any point. And it was a gain to rest and feed their horses on good nutritious grain instead of grass so they could urge them on next day.

It was a needed delay on more than one account. Mr. Normand and his party needed sleep. Worn out men are not fit for battle, much less to travel, and they knew one must be done and the other must be expected before the scout was ended.

So they supped and hired men to groom and feed their horses while they slept.

Before the dawn of day they were up and had breakfast, and at the first glimpse of light were on the trail, now twelve strong.

Within a half-hour Mr. Normand learned the wisdom of Cody, who led the trail, in resting for the night.

The party ahead had separated. One trail struck off to the right toward the hills, the other kept the road. With which the poor girl remained was now a question. Will soon settled it. At the last station a pony—small but strong—had been taken, and she was allowed to ride alone, with a guard on either side.

The small pony-tracks still kept the main road. Where the others were going mattered not now, and Cody and his crowd dashed on, hoping yet to overtake the outlaws before another night darkened the trail.

An hour only after dawn they saw where the outlaws had camped for the night.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE CAPTIVE.

POOR Libbie. It was almost merciful she remained unconscious so long. For she was now far away from the horrible sights at the station when she recovered her senses.

Shuddering when she opened her eyes, she saw the hardened, desperate faces of the band around her, with but two she had ever seen before.

One was that of the leader—the other that of the Indian who, now as guide, led the column.

She was held on a horse before another man—a ruffian in whose stern face she saw no look of mercy or pity.

She did not speak, even when she saw the pale, set face of Omaha Charley turned toward her, and his dark eyes looking in hers.

She saw his right arm in a sling, his shoulder bandaged and a patch on one of his cheeks. She knew her pistol had done the work, and she only grieved that her aim had not been more deadly. She looked all through the band for the dark, forbidding face of Faro Ben. He was not there, and she exulted in the thought that at least one of the wretches had fallen where poor old Jake lay dead, as she believed. Despairing of life and liberty, why should she not exult in every act that helped disable her enemies.

At the first station, when she saw men who she fondly hoped might help her, stand back, cowed down by the superior force of desperadoes, and even the stage with its passengers in their power, her nature gave way again, and she went into a convulsive fit which seemed destined to end her young life then and there.

Terribly alarmed, the outlaw chief found there was a physician on the stage. We already know the result. It brought her to, and the chief, with his own wounds properly dressed, grew stronger. Yet had not his stern will been strong, he could not have kept the saddle. He had lost much blood when first wounded before he could have the blood stanching, and he was so weak only frequent use of stimulating drink kept him up.

He should have made a much longer march that day, but his own weakness and regard for the condition of his captive made him stop earlier than was prudent, had he any thought of being pursued.

He had sent a small hunting party toward the hills, and they rejoined him at camp, with plenty of fresh game.

Large fires were built by the fearless men close to a bright little stream. Corn brought from the last station furnished a liberal ration for their horses. A shelter of boughs was raised for Libbie, and a couch of blankets laid for her. Here, with two guards to watch her, she sat wondering if the outlaw leader meant indeed to avoid her presence altogether, for he had not yet once spoken to her since her capture. She began to hope she was held for ransom, and if the story she had read in the paper was true, friends would come to purchase her freedom.

She could not hope for it in any other way. Those men, armed, desperate and familiar with the prairie and mountains, could hold her forever if they tried, for where they could not give battle, they could elude pursuit.

Supper was brought to her—coffee, bread and fresh-broiled steaks. She ate because she knew she must preserve her strength—not that she was hungry. The scenes through which she had passed on that dreadful morning—her then surroundings, destroyed all appetite.

After the dishes she had partly emptied had been taken away Libbie saw the chief approach her shelter.

The strong firelight fell on his pale face. He seemed to be suffering. She thought of poor Old Jake and her murdered friends. She had heard her guards say no man was left alive at Sweet-water Station.

Therefore she felt no pity for the outlaw. She only wished he could suffer more—that he could die in agony. Suffering and distress had made her heart like stone.

"You are treated well?" he asked, speaking in a low tone and bending a glance of interest rather than hate upon her.

She did not speak—she merely bowed her head.

"I will not disturb you—rest in peace!" he said, and he turned away.

His step was slow—he almost staggered as he went—he was so weak.

Libbie saw that her guards were vigilant—that neither closed an eye before they were relieved by others equally as watchful. She knew that escape except by death, from such men, was impossible.

Weary and faint, satisfied that no indignity would be offered to her, she drew a blanket over her head and slept.

Long before day dawned the camp was astir, horses and people fed, and everything made ready for an early, rapid march.

Libbie, allowed now to ride by herself, but closely under guard, felt stronger. She began to grow more composed, and hope slowly took the place of dark despair.

She noticed that the party moved on much more speedily than on the previous day and also that a detour was made from the main road, evidently to avoid a station.

"They fear pursuit," she thought. "And if they fear, why should I not hope?"

Often when a turn left a chance for her to look back she did so.

The leader noticed this and ordered her guards to move up to the front where he was.

The Indian had been sent to the rear on the lookout. It was after midday when they struck the main road once more after they had made a second detour.

Yet no halt was called. The horses were pressed forward at a rapid gait.

Suddenly the Indian galloped to the front and in a low tone spoke to the leader.

Libbie listened. She only caught a little that Bear-Claw said:

She heard the words: "Cody—Pony Express—alone!"—that was all.

"Go back, lay for him and bring me his scalp!" was the outlaw's order.

The Indian wheeled his horse and rode back.

CHAPTER XLIV.

A NARROW ESCAPE.

WHEN Will Cody and his party came to the spot where the outlaws had camped overnight he halted to make an examination. Frank Powell and the detective joined in the inspection.

The first thing Cody took notice of was the bough-house erected for the use of the captive. Giving it a mere glance he passed on around the camp and saw the trail made by the hunters on their return, which accounted for those who had left the band on the road below.

He knew they were hunters because the hides of an antelope, and elk, and a buffalo-calf, with portions of the fresh meat lay on the ground where they had been cast carelessly away.

About the fires were the spits and toasting-forks on which they had cooked their suppers and breakfast. The coals and embers still aglow, showed that the outlaws had not been long gone.

Frank Powell, full of romance, stood near the entrance of the bough-house and said:

"There, Will—there has the lovely form of the poor captive reposed waiting, waiting for us to come like knights of the ancient time to rescue her from—Ha, what is that? A paper—as I live, fastened to the side of the shelter!"

Springing in so hastily that he knocked a part of the shelter over, he grasped the paper he had seen. It was the slip that Libbie had cut from the newspaper which Will had handed to her days before. On the blank edge in a pencil mark these words were written:

"Again in the hands of Omaha Charley—save me before I save myself in death."

LIBBIE.

Frank read it aloud. Will, Mr. Normand and the detective heard it.

"We will save her. Into your saddles, all hands. They are not over two or three hours ahead. Our horses are as good as theirs. Forward—follow me!"

The trail was plain, though the outlaw was at his old trick of turning and winding off the route so as to mislead pursuers if he could.

Speeding their best, the pursuers got no sight of those they followed, and, as all stations were now avoided, got no chance to gain recruits or get fresh horses.

"They will not halt till night falls or their horses give out!" said Will, when he found by the sun it was after noon and they still kept ahead. "We are gaining I am sure!" he added, soon after, for a watercourse they had crossed was still muddy.

"Better for us not to overtake them till they camp!" said the detective. "Then we may surprise them!"

"Not much!" said Cody. "At their last camp they had sentinels out a rifle-shot nearly from the camp. I saw where they stood and moved around—they'll guard more carefully by night than in broad daylight. If they'd halt by day, and we could get a creep up on them and the first fire, I'd risk what we left, hand to hand! When Frank and me dropped four in one minute, I reckon we gave 'em a sign of what we could do at close quarters!"

They were riding in close order now, and as

at any moment they might come in sight of the outlaws, Cody suggested that it was best he should keep in advance two or three hundred yards as a scout, and if he saw the villains he could halt and let the rest close up in more silence and care.

Powell was equally good on the trail and wanted to join, but Will said no—and then to better prepare his party for defense if the outlaws, seeing him, should turn on him, he told them to dismount and take cover behind trees if they saw him turn to come back and wave his hat.

Taking Libbie's pony, so as to rest his horse, he rode on very fast for a short time, and was soon satisfied that he closed very fast on the outlaws.

Thinking he was far enough ahead of his party, he checked his animal a little, and at that moment got a glimpse of the scarlet blanket of Bear-Claw, a well-remembered garment, since once before it caused the discovery of its owner.

"So! The Indian guide is there in their rear!" he muttered. "He must have seen me, for he went out of sight like a flash. If so—we've got to flank and feel close, or we're ambushed!"

He checked his horse and thought what he had best do.

"I'll ride on a little way, and if I see no more of him—then I'll besure he saw me and wait for the rest!"

Slowly, expecting his own party to come in sight, Cody rode forward. He reached the spot as near as he could judge where the Indian was when he went out of sight. His pony was at a walk, and Will heard the clatter of hoofs behind him, knowing thus that his party was closing up.

Suddenly, so quick that Cody was nearly thrown backward, the pony reared up, and in its motion saved the life of the daring boy, for a knife, thrown with unerring aim, went hilt-deep in the pony's breast instead of where it was aimed by the Indian, who, lying at full length in the grass, waited for his enemy with the stealth and ferocity of a panther.

Cody had his rifle in his hand, but before he could raise it to his shoulder the baffled red-skin who had left his scarlet blanket with his horse up the trail darted away with a fiendish yell through the bushes and was out of sight so quick none of the pursuers saw him, though they were then scarce a pistol-shot away.

"Off your horses and take cover, men, in a breath!" shouted Cody, and he sprang behind a tree as he spoke, leaving the dying pony where it fell.

Every second now seemed an age to him.

He thought the yell of the Indian would bring the main force of the outlaws charging right back on his little band.

Every man of the pursuers turning their horses in the thick brush sprung to the ground and stood to their arms, under cover, awaiting the attack.

They had seen Cody's horse rear and fall dead—they saw him raise his rifle to fire, heard the fiendish yell of the flying red-skin, but no enemy came in sight—no hostile shot was fired.

What could it mean? Several minutes passed and then Cody called out:

"Hold your ground, covered as you are. The Indian who guides the outlaws came within a shade of killing me. Only the quick sight and action of that poor pony saved me and cost its life. The enemy is near—how near I will find out!"

He started, stooping low, up the road, his cocked rifle ready for instant service.

"Will—you shall not go alone! Wait for me!"

"I will, if the rest stand firm, for they may thus save us if we have to fall back in a hurry!"

In ten seconds young Powell and his friend, side by side crept up the road.

Soon they came to where the outlaws had halted and where the Indian had wheeled his horse to go back.

Then—they saw where the same horse returned and was ridden to the head of the column. It had a peculiar track. It was unshod. Indians seldom have a horse shod.

The horse had reached the head of the column, the position of the tracks of all the horses showed they were not moving, but at rest.

Then—the column seemed to have gone on at a gallop—the tracks were far apart. In the rear, the unshod horse still showed its tracks, also on the jump. A few rods the two scouts followed the trail and there, right on the pathway was the scarlet blanket of Bear-Claw.

It was too conspicuous and he had thrown it away.

"They overestimated our force and have fled!" said Cody. "Go back, Frank, and call back the rest—bring my horse with the saddle from the pony. Poor thing, I'm sorry it is killed."

Powell went back, and in a few minutes the men, remounted, had closed up with Cody.

He explained to Mr. Normand what he believed from the nature of the tracks, and said that now their vicinity was known to the outlaws they must proceed with caution to avoid ambuscade.

Two flankers, each taking opposite sides of the trail, were to ride fifty yards ahead and fifty yards to the right and left of the trail.

Cody himself would keep the trail and ride fifty yards ahead also. Thus, if they came under fire, the advance and flanks would first discover the enemy and be ready to take cover and fall back to the main force.

"The plan is good!" said Mr. Young. "I will take one flank; let Mr. Powell take the other."

"And remember, the instant a shot is fired, you take cover and act every man for himself, only shooting when you see an outlaw. Be careful not to hit your friends—we want no shots in the back!"

As he said this, Cody rode forward on his own horse, the flankers took their places, and the pursuers went on at a sweeping trot.

Just before dark, crossing a stream they found the water yet white with foam dashed up by galloping horses. They were surely not a half-hour behind.

CHAPTER XLV.

A SURPRISE.

To one who did not know the situation it would seem ridiculous and more than cowardly for thirty well-armed men to fly from barely twelve and one of the last unhorsed. An explanation is needed.

Her heart almost ceased to beat when Libbie heard the Indian's words and the stern order of Omaha Charley:

"Go back—lay for him, and bring me his scalp!"

There was a murderous gleam in the Indian's eye. He tossed his rifle to an outlaw, threw his scarlet blanket down, and drawing his long knife rode to the rear of the column and went out of sight.

She looked back—she could not help it—and trembling like a leaf prayed to God for the safety of her friend within her soul, in silent agony.

Three or four minutes passed—it seemed very, very long before a sound was heard.

Then a terrible yell rung through the air. No shot followed, and almost fainting she sat her horse, expecting each instant to see the soft brown locks she had so often looked upon all gory in the Indian's hand.

He was back in a minute after his yell was heard, and the blood came back in a flood to her face; the red fiend had no scalp, not even a knife in his hand.

"Where is the scalp?" cried the outlaw chief, angrily.

"Me no get. Horse me kill, not him! Had to run—he have rifle drop on me—me dodge—run in bush—he no see—no shoot! But heap men down road—he scout, they come!"

"How many?" asked the chief.

"No get time to count. Road all full! Heap many!" cried the Indian, all breathless from the run he had had and the haste of his words.

"Forward, men, at a gallop. Before we fight we'll know what force we've got to buckle! Bear-Claw, throw away that cursed blanket—it can be seen for miles. Then keep in the rear and let me know if the enemy gain ground upon us!"

Sullenly the Indian obeyed the order. He had given a pony for that blanket. It was the pride of his life. But he knew better than to disobey an order from Omaha Charley.

On as fast as their horses could go and not break down, the band rode until, crossing a stream, they struck the old stage-road once more.

"How far to a station?" asked the leader of Bear-Claw, whom he ordered to the front again.

"Not far—we there by dark go this way!"

"Forward! Tell me when we are near so we can give the horses breath for a charge!"

"Me tell!"

And the Indian rode on—the rest following. The tired horses were scarcely allowed to wet their mouths in the stream before they dashed on.

Twilight's gray mantle wrapped everything in somber shade, when the Indian slowed up and raised his hand to stop.

"Station close by! See light!" he said.

"Halt, close up and hear my orders!" said the stern leader, who since danger appeared near seemed to have gained strength instead of weakening. "As soon as our horses get full breath, I shall charge right in on the station and take the men by surprise. Fire no weapon—use no threats—let no violence be done without we are resisted. Then—if I bid you, wipe out every man there! Hush—not a sound or motion till I am done."

"Seize every fresh horse there—there must be enough with ponies and mules to mount us all, put our saddles and equipments on, take what bread and meat you want, and we will be off to the next station at our best speed. All can be done in five minutes, if you are cool and steady. Not a cheer—not a word—I will do the talking. Look to your horses—use your spurs—forward—CHARGE!"

The horses seemed to know it was a last effort and as they felt the spur they almost flew over the ground. That which Libbie rode with the

rest, for her guards on either side touched her as they rode.

In a minute they were at the station, dismounted, and the station men were at their mercy if they raised a hand.

"Surrender all! One act of resistance and every station man dies like a dog!" thundered the outlaw.

So sudden, so complete a surprise literally paralyzed every man.

"Half go for the horses, half remain on guard!" cried the chief to his own men.

"Agent, bid your cook bring here all the cooked meat and bread you have; my men are hungry!" was the next stern command.

It was obeyed, and Libbie, who saw how terror-stricken the station men were, almost hated them for what seemed to her such abject cowardice.

She was placed in a chair to rest, but her guards gave her no chance to explain her position by word or look.

In a few minutes, it scarce seemed seconds, fresh animals were at the door, saddled up and read to start. Libbie was put in her saddle on a small, lithe Indian pony so like her own that for an instant it seemed as if she was on *its* back. Oh, for a rod of start in the darkness, she thought. I would win my own freedom.

But to her dismay she was fastened to the saddle and a man each side had a leading-line fast to her pony.

"They will give me no chance!" she sighed, as she heard the word forward, once more.

Away, like clouds before the wind, on animals used to the road night and day, the bandits rode for the next station.

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE UTE RUNNER.

THE outlaws had not been gone over half an hour when Cody and his friends on horses which could scarce go faster than a walk, rode into the station.

It was well they came so slow and answered "friends" when hailed, for the station men had got under arms and with closed doors were ready for a fight. They did not mean to be surprised a second time.

When Cody got off his used-up horse, and the rest of the party left their tired-out animals, he listened to what the outlaws had done and groaned in anguish over the recital.

"They'll be forty miles ahead by daylight, if they keep up the game!" he groaned. "On fresh horses every ten miles, what can't they do?"

"They can kill poor Libbie—she never can stand it. That's what they can do!" cried Frank Powell.

"They'll meet a Tartar before they know it, if some fool don't tell them so they can steer clear of him!" cried a stage-driver—one of the oldest on the route.

"What do you mean, Sam Bleeker?" cried Cody, who had known him for years—since he first freighted it, on the road.

"Cap'n Fulton with his company of cavalry—the old Black Horse cap'n they call him—went over the road yesterday. He is on a scout and takes it easy. If they run into him, good-by road-agents—that's all!"

"It is my only hope. The fiend is too sharp for us. But, men, for mercy sake, feed and rub down our horses. Every man shall be well paid for the work. The poor beasts are tired out and so are we—too tired to eat or drink!"

"We'll see when hot coffee and some grub is on the table for you!" said the station-agent, who also ordered every man that was outside of the cook-room to attend to the last horses in.

Seeing that the horses would receive every care, Cody, with Mr. Normand and the rest entered the station and threw themselves down to rest. The best of them were used up. Cody, hardy as a mule, used to fast riding and long trips, could hardly move when called to supper. The strain on his mind helped to weaken his body.

Fresh coffee and a good square meal had a wonderful effect on the little band. They felt so much better in an hour that they talked of going right on.

And had there been fresh horses for them to ride, they would have done it. Cody even went out to see the animals. Some were at their feed—most, however, were lying down, too tired to eat. And when man or beast get that tired, be sure there is no "go" in them.

So Cody asked the men to feed and groom the best of the outlaw horses as well as his own, for in the morning he meant to pick the best in all the lot.

Then, letting the station men put out sentinels, Cody and all his party turned in for a solid sleep, knowing they would surely break down on the trail if they did not have it.

Orders were left to call them at least an hour before dawn and to have breakfast ready at that hour. The party was prepared for liberal payments, Mr. Normand being well supplied with funds and willing to expend it freely.

While it was yet very dark all hands were up, refreshed with a good wash and seated at a table with plenty of strong coffee and bread and meat before them. The agent as master of ceremonies urged them to eat heartily—nothing

like meeting crisp morning air with a well-filled stomach, he said.

"Now call in the men who have worked on our horses and stood watch while we slept. I wish to pay them off," said Mr. Normand.

The men were called in, and into the hand of each a bright five-dollar piece was laid. One who stepped forward attracted especial attention. He was a Ute Indian, tall, straight as an arrow, with unusual length of limb. His eye was bright and keen, and his long, black hair worn loose to show he was not on the war-path with a scalp-lock trimmed ready for an enemy's hand and knife.

"Who is that?" asked Cody of the agent.

"Pete, the Pony—Utah Pete, the greatest runner on the plains!" said the agent. "He can run down any three ponies on the route. It is fun for him, but he makes money when anybody can be found to bet against him. He has one fault—it is the curse of his race—he loves whisky!"

"Why didn't I know this last night?" said Will. "He could have been half-way to Captain Fulton with a letter asking his aid in our work!"

"True—very true; and I never thought of it. I'd had such a scare, my head was all in a muddle. But it is not too late now. He'll start and never break a run till he finds the Black Horse Captain and his men. Peter, come here. Do you want to earn a good lot of money?"

"Me no hear good in morning till me get dram!" was the reply of the "noble red-man."

"Bring him a glass of whisky from my bottle!" said the agent to the table waiter.

The Indian emptied the glass at one swallow.

"Now me hear all right!" he said.

"One hundred dollars in gold to take a letter soon—soon as you can to Black Horse Cap'n. One hundred now, and a hundred more when you prove he has got it by an answer or his coming to help us!"

"Me go—give agent money keep for me—ready in three breaths!" was the reply.

Cody and Normand consulted a moment and the letter was written stating the capture of Libbie, who had her, their number and that of the pursuers, and asking him to head off and help to save the girl and capture or destroy the miscreants who held her.

The letter was not done before Pete, the Pony, stood before them ready for the race.

He was almost naked. He wore only a loose tunic and breech-clout, in the folds of which he secured the letter—his head was bare, but on his feet he wore strong moccasins of elk-hide laced above his ankles.

In his hand a light rifle—over his shoulder powder-horn and ball-pouch, in a tight belt a long, dangerous-looking knife—a little haversack of dried meat hung by his side.

"Me ready—little dram now and you no see me till you hear from great cap'n. Me know him!"

A half-glass of whisky and the Ute went from their sight like a flash. It was yet pitch dark, but he went out in the gloom with as free a step as a bounding deer on its native heath.

"Now I feel some hope!" said Will. "Those fiends have gained on us fearfully, but if Captain Fulton cuts them off, as he will, if the Ute keeps up his name—we will have them between two fires!"

"They must rest some time, and while they do the runner will pass them!" said Powell.

"Without they see and kill him!" said the detective. "Then your letter would put them on their guard!"

"Pete is cunning as he is swift. He'll see their trail and them, too, before they see him, and keep out of their sight!" said the agent. "And he is true as steel. He loves whisky, but once on duty, he could not be hired to drink a drop till he is free again!"

"Bring out the horses!" said Cody. "Bring out all and we'll pick those that look as if they'd stand the racket, for we'll make a hard run to-day!"

It was just growing light when the horses—over forty in number—were led out. Only three or four of the outlaw horses were in better condition than those which Cody's party had brought in. Among them was Satan, whom his master had left with regret. Cody chose him, for he was all spirit, and rest and food had put new life in him.

All hands and three more volunteers were in saddle by the time it was light enough to see the road.

"Fifteen—we are only one to two, but our cause is worth the odds!" cried Will, as he galloped on in the lead.

The trail was plain—the bandits in close order, keeping the main road, had not tried to hide a sign or turn right or left.

Cody and his men found that the outlaws had served the next station as they did the last, changing horses in haste and doing no damage.

Their tracks showed the same reckless speed—the same close order of march—the same evident fear of pursuit.

Three stations were passed—the outlaws must be over twenty miles ahead—they'll surely rest. "No men can stand so great a strain, let alone that poor girl!" was the thought of all in pursuit.

They were right in the conjecture. Twenty-four hours in the saddle, human nature could do no more—even Omaha Charley's stern will and strength gave way, and at a good spot for grass and water he halted, though the animals taken from the last station were fresh.

Poor Libbie for hours had been steadied on her horse by her guards. She could not fall, for she was lashed to the saddle.

"We halt, men, for two hours. We have left worn-out stock behind us, and our pursuers are far in the rear. Sleep while you can and let the horses feed. We can eat when we ride!"

This order from Omaha Charley did not have to be repeated. They had ridden out from the road just far enough to escape observation.

In ten minutes every man was on the ground asleep. Worn out in body they lay there like logs over the allotted time. Over three hours went by and then they had to be called by their restless chief.

"You are all right now—eat and drink a mouthful while you saddle up and then forward once more. In a little while we strike a broken country and we'll reach a pass where we can stand against thrice our numbers!" he cried, as he remounted his horse and saw Libbie placed on hers.

Liquor and food were offered to her and she had taken both. She knew she would die if she did not, and now that a hope of rescue with a certainty of pursuit was in her breast, she felt as if she must live.

Omaha Charley did not trouble her—he did not speak directly to her, but his eyes were on her nearly all the time.

Rising a hill, Bear-Claw in front, saw a cloud of dust before them on a level stretch in front of the hill.

"Stage come—Pony Express too!" he said.

"To the right, turn! Up that ravine and out of sight, men! We'll not let those who are behind us know where we are at this hour, as they would if the stage met them, or we stopped the old buss here. We'll make up for it by and by!"

Not a murmur from the outlaws. His will was their law. The Pony Express flew by and a half-mile behind the great coach lumbered on, the six horses ahead on a sweeping trot as they came over the hill, on a run as they descended.

Little did the driver or his six passengers dream what a band of human wolves had turned aside to let them pass—that only the exigency of their own case had led them to spare those who would have been at their mercy had they held the road.

For the outlaws had ridden up a ravine a half-mile or more so that not a glimpse of them could be seen. And they had taken time to water their horses, as well as to drink themselves from a clear stream that headed in the hill near by.

Thus they did not see a lithe form dart by, but the Ute, for it was he, saw their trail and rushed on, leaving the dust of the stage behind him as he kept his unbroken gait, looking behind but once. When at the far end of the level stretch, just at a turn he looked back, for the station ahead was in sight and he wanted to see if they were coming.

They had just reached the road and were coming straight on. In an instant he left the road and took a short cut to strike it a mile beyond the station, for he did not wish to be seen there, lest he be spoken of in the hearing of the outlaws, and he wished also to gain all he could while they stopped, as he supposed they would at the station.

But here again, though the Ute was too far ahead to know it, the outlaw leader once more took up his dodging course and flanked the station unseen.

His animals had not been hard pressed since the last change and were fresh.

On he swept, striking the road not far from where the Ute had reached it, and keeping Bear-Claw in the rear to look out, he headed on for the hilly, rocky section he had spoken of.

If Bear-Claw had been in front, ten to one he had seen what the eyes of the weak and weary leader failed to notice—the track of a large foot touching the ground in leaps of never less than four or five feet.

And he would have known that a runner had passed up since the stage went down, and have grown suspicious of the reason.

But the discovery was not to come—not then, at any rate.

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE BOYS IN BLUE.

It was yet two hours to sundown, but into a lovely glen not far to the west of the stage road, say a good rifle-shot, a body of horsemen in close column rode at a walk. Dark-blue uniforms with yellow facings told that they were United States dragoons.

The figure above the letter B on every cap, as well as the crossed sabers told their place in the army. These signs read Company B, Second Dragoons.

The captain, a bronze-faced veteran of noble presence and commanding figure, rode a large black horse whose arched neck, small ears, deep chest and clean limbs told he was a thoroughbred.

"Halt and dismount!" came the order from the leader's lips. "We will bivouac here, Lieutenant Ingalls!"

He addressed the last remark to his first lieutenant, a few years younger, but a veteran too in look and action.

"A capital place, captain—shall we let the horses graze before we grain?"

"Yes, sir—a half-hour at grass, and then a half-ration of oats. We must be sparing of our forage."

The officer gave the order; the horses were soon unsaddled and picketed out to grass in the rich savanna where the halt was made.

"Light small fires and make coffee. Use brush and make as little smoke as possible!" was the captain's next order.

He was a veteran Indian-fighter, and among the wily and treacherous Seminoles, the bravest of their race, he had learned lessons of woodcraft and cunning in war never to be forgotten. Over the hot sands of Florida his face had gained its hue of bronze, and long service there had made the officers and men of Company B dreaded as much as any in the service.

It was no wonder, with Twiggs and the gallant Harney at the head of the regiment.

Soon the aroma of coffee rose, and with cooked rations in hand the men were happy.

It was yet light and clear and not a sentinel was posted near, though a solitary vedette stood to horse on a small hill which overlooked the valley and the road beyond.

Suddenly a gleam of light flashed right in the captain's face. He turned like a flash and looked at the vedette on the hill.

"Corporal Hall has discovered something—watch his signals!" said the captain.

The light cast upon him came from a small mirror in the vedette's hands, used often as a signal on the plains.

"A flash—then three—a single flash—now four!" said Lieutenant Ingalls. "It reads, man on foot, running—on your trail—northwest."

The captain waved his handkerchief to tell the vedette all was right, then drew his glass from the case, set it to focus and looked in the direction named.

"An Indian, running as if the deuce was after him—he must be from a friendly tribe or he wouldn't come in here."

"Ah—he holds a paper up. New orders, I'll stake the cigars. But why send them by an Indian, and he on foot, when horses are plenty in the service?"

"He lopes like an antelope. Ancient Moses, how he comes!" cried the lieutenant.

He had hardly spoken when the Ute arrived, halting only when he stood in front of the officer.

"Letter for Big Captain! Me tire—one drink whisky! Run since fore day!"

"Ingalls, give the poor red a drink from your flask. Here's news which means work for us—just such work as our boys will like—a band of outlaws to wipe out!"

"Is the letter reliable, captain?"

"Yes, indeed—it is from little Cody whom we saw so much of last summer at Grand Island when we were among the Pawnees. A girl—the same who was abducted before, an English heiress, is in the hands of thirty outlaws, heading this way. He is after them with only fifteen men, the young dare-devil, and he wants us to head them off so he can get up!"

"Who are you?" He turned to the Indian.

"Utah Pete! You know me! Me beat your horse quarter race at Laramie, year ago!"

"Pony Pete—it is him. Why you're so white with dust I did not recognize you. Now where are these road-agents and murderers?"

"I not know now. Hour ago I go by 'em on road, six—seven mile down. They come slow, horse tired. Maybe camp on Bear Run—two mile back. Plenty grass, water and wood!"

"Are you too tired to scout?"

"No, Big Cap'n! Me take little dram—one bite bread and go!"

"Want a horse?" asked the lieutenant, as he poured out the small dram in the cup of his flask.

"No—my leg all horse Pete wants. Me come back as soon as me see 'em!"

"Saddle up without noise, lieutenant, and send a relief to Corporal Hall, so he can get coffee. Have the men all ready to mount and be off. Inspect arms as soon as they are in line!"

These orders, obeyed as promptly as given, were executed, and the company, ready for service, was in line and standing to horse when the Indian, with his long, steady lope, came back.

"They camp where me think. Very careful! Got sentinel out—up and down!"

"How near the main road?" asked the captain.

"Close to him, cap'n!"

"Did you see the woman?"

"Yes, cap'n, me see um little squaw. She heap sick! They carry her and lay her down near fire!"

"Poor thing! She'll hear glad music by and by. How near can we go with the horses without alarming them? I want to surprise the rascals!"

"Bout a mile! Then go foot—no noise—they not look till you so close you get 'em all—heap o' scalp!"

"We'll try it. Rest half an hour, Pete. Get coffee and supper for him!" said the thoughtful officer. "By then it will be time to move!"

Just as darkness set in, Company B moved out, took the road and in it felt a great deal more like making a dash than in the scout they had just come through.

Slowly, every saber hooked up, carbines in hand, not an order loud spoken, the column went down the road.

Every officer and man was a veteran and knew just how to act when they sought to surprise an enemy.

It was now quite dark. The Indian on foot kept just ahead of the black horse of the captain.

"Look! See um fire? Stop here—we creep up an' get um scalp! They no hear. Bear Run make heap noise running over stone!"

"Dismount—every eighth man remain in care of the horses. The rest follow me!" came from the captain.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE ONSET.

WHEN Cody found that the outlaws were once more dodging the stations, he let two men, Powell and one of the California ranchmen, keep the trail, while he kept the road and got fresh horses for all his party at the stations the outlaws missed. This enabled him to gain on them rapidly, and by various signs as night drew near, he felt that he was fast closing on them.

The Pony Express Rider had not seen the bandits. But he had seen troops only a few miles back. And he had also seen an Indian loping along like a scared antelope.

Similar news came from the stage-driver and his passengers.

"We're all right!" cried Cody, in exultation. "The troops will be on hand when we need them. I know Captain Fulton well. A braver man never sat in a saddle. He will swoop down on those wretches and leave them scattered like dead wolves on the plain. Forward—forward! we make no halt until fair Libbie is safe!"

He did not know Omaha Charley yet. The latter was daring, but he was also prudent. When he camped he always threw out sentinels so far he could not easily be surprised, even by the most stealthy foe.

Though he had not received any intimation that troops were anywhere near, ahead, or in his rear, the outlaw omitted no precaution when he camped that night. He knew pursuit was made by one who would never leave his trail till he was killed—young Cody—who had already made a name for himself in Borderland.

That night he took an extra precaution. He selected eight of his very best men, those, too, who had the strongest horses, and sent them to a valley over half a mile back of his main camp, with Libbie, who was so fatigued by the rapid march that she could scarcely stand when taken from her saddle. To these men he gave orders, if the main camp was attacked, not to pause an instant, but to carry the girl to a hill range in the rear and wait for him.

To make things more deceptive, should Cody come up, he erected a bough-house, where he himself intended to rest, for two reasons.

First—it would not be fired on for fear of injuring its supposed fair occupant.

Second—it would give him a close and sure shot at Cody, who, of course, would rush there at the beginning of the onset.

Little did he dream the attack would come from the front and not his rear, and that Cody would be a mile or more away when he was attacked.

Yet such was the fact.

On closing in near enough to see the fires, Captain Fulton, moving in silence, with his men in close order, as near as possible, came almost on a sentinel.

The Indian, Utah Pete, was with him, acting as his guide.

Laying his hand on the captain's arm to check him, he drew his knife and glided more like a serpent than a man, upon the outlaw sentinel.

He had almost reached him, when the man, hearing a small twig crack under his touch, turned toward the noise, his rifle cocked and ready.

The Indian made one leap—his knife went home to the outlaw's heart, but his rifle was discharged as he fell.

"Into line by the left; forward, double quick! Charge!" cried Fulton, seeing the outlaws spring to arms.

Cheering, his men rushed forward, their officers, as ever, in the lead, and with a straggling fire, the astonished outlaws rushed for their horses. But the dismounted troopers, firing their carbines as they rushed in, were upon them, before half were near the horses, which unsaddled were staked out to grass near the road. Many an outlaw dropped before he reached the grass, and others, defiant, turned to fight, and thus to die, though at the first Omaha Charley shouted:

"Retreat! The regular troops are upon us!" One or two of the men sprung on the unsad-

dled horses and got off in the darkness—but they were met below. The outlaw chief at the first pistol-shot leaped upon his own horse, which saddled and fed to corn, had been staked near where he lay down to rest.

He saw in a few seconds that there was no hope for resistance, and just as a ringing cheer was heard down the road, coming, as he believed, from Cody's party, he deemed prudence his best safeguard, and turning his horse toward the hills dashed out into the darkness.

A shower of balls followed his flight, but he went off apparently unscathed, and was lost to sight in a second.

In less than five minutes the skirmish—it could not be called a battle—was over. Just as one of the cavalymen sabered the last wounded outlaw that could be seen, Cody and his followers charged into the lower side of the camp, shooting down two flying outlaws as they came.

"Where is Miss Libbie? Have you got her in safety—unhurt, Captain Fulton?" cried Cody, as he rode up where the captain stood before the empty bough-house.

"She is not here—she has not been seen!" answered the captain, gloomily. Then he added:

"My officers and men are now searching everywhere for some trace of her!"

"Oh, Heaven! They may have killed her when their capture or defeat was certain. Boys, make torches—raise the fires—look over every inch of ground! She *must*, she *shall* be found!"

All search was unavailing. The bodies of twenty bandits found on the ground and no more, told that ten had escaped. With these, undoubtedly the poor girl had been taken. And in the night it was next to impossible to trail them.

Cody, aided by Utah Pete, tried to strike the trail, but they failed.

"We must wait till daylight—then my whole force shall be separated in squads and sent in search. Between us, my brave young friend, we surely can track ten outlaws with the incumbrance they will have in her."

"She was so weak she had to be *carried* when they halted. So Utah Pete reported, and I am sure he is truthful!"

"Yes, Captain Fulton, and that is worst of all. They will kill her—she must be nearly dead when she cannot walk. A braver, truer little woman never lived! Ah—excuse me, sir, here is Mr. Normand, co-heir with her to a vast estate in England. He was her father's secretary—I suppose you know her father was Lord Glenarvon, of England!"

"Yes—I saw it in Eastern papers, but till now did not know this was the lady!"

"It is, and now you can see why these lawless wretches have twice captured her!"

"Yes—to hold her to ransom, no doubt. They will not kill her, as you fear. They see too much money by holding her safe."

"They will not slay her—she will die of fatigue!" said young Powell. "Even strong men are almost broken down in the pursuit her abductors have had to evade!"

"We must wait for dawn to do anything certain in the way of search," said the captain. "I will have my company all up, standing to saddle, for they have had an easy scout. Let your people rest till dawn, Mr. Cody. Your horses shall be fed from my rations, and they will be ready to move when we are."

CHAPTER XLIX. DISCOMFITED.

POOR Libbie was so utterly exhausted when the outlaws last halted that she hardly knew whether it was night or day. She was carried from her horse to a grassy knoll under a tree, and some liquor, slightly diluted, was given to her. This she swallowed while half unconscious and then she heard the chief give orders to move her further back to have her out of the way in case of attack. She could not resist either by voice or action, and was utterly passive when again lifted on a horse and supported there by strong hands, she was taken on in the darkness she knew not how far.

Again she was taken from her horse and carried a short distance carefully, and even kindly, for she heard the man who lifted her as if she had been a babe, say:

"Poor thing! She is about used up. I should think if the Cap *did* care anything for her, he'd stand and fight before he'd kill her in running from a few station men."

She did not speak, but when he offered her some food and a small flask of liquor after he had seated her on a blanket up under a rocky ledge, she took both thankfully, and both ate and drank. She wanted strength now, more than ever, for she knew by what she heard that the outlaws would be attacked and her rescue attempted.

She could see the fires in the main camp plainly, and she rested with her back against a large rock and watched and listened.

She ate almost all her food, and took several sips of liquor, and new life seemed to come to her, though she did not say a word to make her guards suspect it. She put the flask and what was left of the food in her pocket for use in case of need. Suddenly a single rifle-shot rung out on the still night air. Then the cheer of the

soldiers, the flash of guns and pistols, reached her ears and those of the startled men.

"We ought to be *there*—the boys are hard pressed!" cried one of the guards.

"We were ordered here, and here we stay till the cap'n comes to tell us otherwise!" said the one who had expressed sympathy for her. "*Jehosaphat!* how they shoot! There must be a hundred on our twenty. Why does the cap'n try to stand them off? Ah! the fire slackens—what there is of it scatters out. Our boys are whipped—what haven't gone under! Why *don't* the cap'n come?"

"He is *here*, you fools—be still. The woods swarm with men—cavalry and Cody's cursed crowd. We must get out of here—where are your horses? Mine was shot dead under me when I got off, and I am hit again."

"The horses are near by, cap'n! Take mine, I'll go on foot!" said the guard who had been so kind to Libbie.

"The girl! You have her safe?"

"Yes—but she is almost dead. She cannot stand. She is all worn down! Why don't you leave her and the horses, too?—on foot we can scale the hills and leave no trace behind us!"

"Leave her? When I am dead and not before. I will kill her before I yield her up and die by the side of her corpse!"

Libbie shuddered, but she did not speak.

"Hark, they come this way. They have lighted torches, too. We *must* leave the horses and scale the hills. Two of the strongest of you lift the girl and carry her on between you!"

"I am dying—leave me—leave me!" faintly moaned poor Libbie.

"Do, for mercy's sake. She'll be no good to you dead!" cried one of the men.

"Silence, sir, if you value life! I'd kill my brother if he angered me in my present mood! Carry her on, I say. I will follow with the rest."

Libbie was lifted, and in the dark, slowly, painfully, the men climbed up among rocks and and brambles. Libbie moaned feebly, but she was so strong in her desperation now that she felt if they set her down she could fairly fly to escape them.

But when the two first men set her down, two more came up and she was again carried on.

She moaned no longer—she was despairing, but if she could make them think her dead, would they not leave her? She allowed her limbs to drop helpless and held her breath.

"Cap'n—this gal is dead. There's no life to her! What's the use of us luggin' a corpse when our own lives are at stake? We'll be hunted to the bitter end when day dawns."

"Lay her down! Let me feel her heart! If it has stopped beating you can go on—but I will stay to fight it out!"

The men bent over and laid her gently down. One dropped a revolver where she felt it with her hand, but he did not seem to miss it. She wanted to take it—to secrete it on her person, but she dared not move, lest motion should be detected.

The chief knelt and laid his hand over her heart. It was still. Fear actually palsied its action. She held her breath—he could detect no respiration.

He rose, with a sigh, and said:

"Grove around, see if there is not some cave, some hole in the rocks where I can lay her. I reckon it is all over with her. Ah—I hear water running—maybe water will bring her to—I'll fetch some. Stay here—do not touch her."

As he rushed through the bushes, Libbie raised the revolver and put it inside her dress.

In the darkness her action was not detected. Nor was it suspected, for she heard the man say to a comrade:

"I've lost one of my revolvers creeping up this infernal hill. It's gone, and there's no use feelin' over the trail for it."

In a few moments the outlaw was back. He had a flask of water, and tenderly he bathed her brow and wet her lips.

"Boys, have you found no hiding-place? My new wound bleeds badly. I don't know but you'd better go on and save yourselves!"

"Cap'n, we'll live by you or die by you! We're not cowards *yet!*" cried the best man in the lot, the one who had been kind to Libbie.

"You are all brave—so were the boys who lie dead down where that cursed gang of blue-coats and mule-drivers are glorifying our defeat. Oh, I was an accursed fool to ever get in this snap. Go on, men, and save yourselves! I command it. Get back to Salvation Hall and—then get help and come back and bury us two here together! I'll not leave her—I reckon I've got my dose anyway."

"Cap'n—we will not—"

"Hush! You *swore* to obey me. Do not break your oaths. She is dead and I am dying! Go on—I command it. If you do not, *I will shoot myself before you!*"

They heard the click of his pistol as he cocked it.

"Don't, Cap—don't do that; we'll go!"

They *all* spoke.

"Go on!" he said, faintly.

Libbie breathed just enough to live—every step they took was new life to her as she heard them struggle on among the rocks and trees.

Fainter and fainter came the noise as they

tore away on and up the hill, intent now only on getting as far from pursuit as they could before light came to show their trail.

At last no sound was heard. A chill of terror began to come over her. Was that man, Omaha Charley really dying? And must she stay in the cold, dark night by his stiffening corpse? The thought was horror. She was going to try to creep away, but a hollow groan broke from his lips and a sob.

She checked herself in time, and lay still as death.

"Poor child!" he moaned. "I was cruel, but I had learned to love her, so I could not bear to lose her! She is dead—but I have not lost her. She is mine—mine—no one can part us now! I will wait till day dawns—we are far from the camp of my enemies, and I will look once more on her sweet face and then I'll end my own agony!"

He stretched himself upon the ground and wept softly, like a child crying itself to sleep. And she—she kept so still, so wakeful, that she knew the moment he was asleep.

She took a long draught from her flask. It warmed up her veins in the chill night-air. It gave her courage, it made her strong, if he woke and learned his mistake before help came—strong in her determination to kill him if he yet stood between her and freedom.

Carefully she took the revolver from her bosom and held it in her hand ready to use if she was *forced* to do it.

The night wore on. Again and again from her flask she supped life and strength. She saw the morning star come up. He slept, breathing faint, but regular. Night began to pale. He still slept. She could see his white face—his clothes drenched with clotted blood. Quiet and the chill night air had choked the bleeding.

It was light at last. She could see smoke from far below in the valley. Oh, she *must* get there. His belt with pistols and knife lay on the ground where he had cast it between him and her.

Slowly, all breathless, she reached her hand for the weapons—secured them, and buckled the belt tight around her own form.

She cared not now how soon he woke. She was well armed. He had not a weapon. She rose and walked to a rock whence she could see men in the valley.

Suddenly two bugles rung out a cavalry call, and the sweet notes echoed from rock to rock along the hillside.

Then he woke with a wild start and tried to rise, for he saw her whom he had thought *dead*, not only on her feet, but appearing strong, for she held a cocked revolver in her hand, and it bore full upon him.

"You have slept long and well!" she said, calmly.

"Am I living—or is it a dream? You *were* dead I *know!* I felt your *heart*, it did not beat—from your lips there came no breath!"

"I am living! I have not been dead! I could kill you, but I will not. You are a brave, brave man! Your errors I would forget. You have been more kind than some would be. Now, hear me. I am going down this hill to join my friends!"

"And to send them up to capture me, so I may die upon the gallows tree!"

"Not so. I will not betray you!"

"Give me my arms before you go then, and I will believe you!"

"I am not so weak as again to place myself in your power. Try not to move from where you are—or you die. Hear me out. Three hundred yards from here—on my trail, you will find your weapons, some food and all the liquor left in this flask. I shall then be beyond your reach, though weak as you are, you can creep to the spot. And I vow by my hope, my surety of freedom—that I will rather mislead than send men to capture you. And now farewell. *If*, as you said when you thought me dead, you have loved me, prove it by leading a *better life hereafter!*"

He tried to rise—his eyes streamed with tears, and he moaned out:

"If I *live* I will! I *WILL!*"

She turned and slowly went from his sight. Once only she looked back. The outlaw was on his knees, his hands were clasped, he seemed to be praying.

Tears were in her eyes. In her heart of hearts she pitied him.

When she had gone, as she judged, three hundred yards she laid down his belt, the flask, and meat and bread enough for a meal. It was all she had. That he might not miss it she tied her white handkerchief, just over the weapons on low bush.

To-day—worn almost to gossamer, in a silken bag, that handkerchief rests over the heart of a reformed man.

CHAPTER L. FOUND.

DETERMINED to make the search for the lost captive systematic and thorough and to follow up every trail till she was found and the rest of the robbers taken or slain, Captain Fulton assumed command of Cody's band as well as of his own company.

"Act under me, gentlemen, and I will guarantee success! I am old on trails. I have tracked the wily savage through pathless everglades, in swamps so dense that the light of day never looked upon the slimy snakes and dark ooze through which we crept; I have ridden them down on sands as hot as coals of fire, and I will not fail you now."

"Let all the men make coffee, feed and groom the horses, eat a fair square meal yourselves and then in ten separate squads, each with a good man at its head, we will take up the search—all fresh and all ready for work."

No dissent from this could be made.

Restless, fearing when she was so near a rescue, that Elizabeth Edgecombe had been slain, Neville Normand strolled back while others staid about the camp-fires.

He was near the foot of the hill range and saw—at first his eyes he feared had erred, the flutter of a light dress among some bushes perhaps the fourth of a mile away.

A minute he paused—he saw it again, a female was hurrying toward the camp.

He did not wait to think—to spread an alarm or ask for help if she was pursued. He felt that it must be her whom he had come to find, and with great bounds he ran to meet her.

Not five minutes passed, and she saw what looked to her to be the noblest face and form on earth, and he, stretching out his arms, cried out:

"Elizabeth Edgecombe it is, and you are saved! I thank THEE, oh, my God!"

Trustingly, fearlessly she placed her hand in his and said:

"You must be Neville Normand!"

"I am, and so glad I am first to see you, first to say you are safe—all the world could not part us two now after all this fearful peril and this despairing struggle to find and save you from an awful fate."

By this time other eyes had fallen on that fair face and form, and full twenty men and officers rushed on to meet the rescued girl.

Cody was wild. He wept and laughed by turns, and Powell acted full as bad.

"How and when did you escape?" was the first sober inquiry.

"Early in the darkness of the night. My guards fled over the mountain in terror and left me to guard myself. I got a revolver, one dropped, and here it is. I shall keep it as long as I live!"

Her reply satisfied them. They believed men who fled so early were now too far away to be found, and she was safe—what more could they want or ask for?

So the searching squads were not told off.

But Captain Fulton took them all to the camp where he was in bivouac when Utah Pete reached him, and made them rest for the day. He sent up the road for an ambulance that he knew had been left at a station, so that Libbie could go down the road in comfort.

He said he would send it and an escort of his own men clear to Omaha, knowing his gallant colonel, Harney, then acting as brigadier, would justify the courtesy.

In it Neville Normand consented to ride, much to her delight, for her heart went out to him on that lone hillside, the first to welcome her to freedom.

Before the ambulance came all the dead had been buried, the wounded, and they were few, cared for, and the plunder gathered up by the soldiers.

Libbie asked at the earliest moment if poor old Jake, her foster-father, was dead, and when told he was alive and in good hands, she shed tears of joy.

She wept, too, when told her pet pony had been killed, but when she knew its death had saved her brave friend's life, all regret vanished.

"Your life, dear Will, is worth all the horses on the plains. You needn't look so at Mr. Normand. He knows I love you as a brother—as for him—well, you'll soon know it anyway—he is to be my husband when we get where church-bells ring. That is settled!"

Poor Frank Powell—he heard that, and he looked as if he had taken—a dose of ipecac.

The ambulance did not arrive until so late that day that it, with Cody's party and the escort, by making fair headway could only go to the first station. Utah Pete, who had received his promised extra money and saw no further use for his services, had started early to carry the news of success down the road, and then it was also sent ahead by the Pony Express and the stage.

Just before the ambulance was ready to start, one of the California ranchmen who had been down by the battle-ground, looking for a pistol he had dropped, came back and told that he had found one more body. It was that of an Indian with a string of grizzly bears' claws around his neck.

He had been mortally wounded, but had crawled up the hollow of an old fallen tree so far his feet only stuck out in sight. In his hand was a pistol—a revolver with but one load discharged, showing he must have been hit early in the action and had not been able to do much in the *melee*.

He had guided his last party, committed his last murder.

When the party reached the first station, the cavalry escort, which so far consisted of the entire company, camped for the night, and the station-house was filled with a joyful company.

Captain Felton here made a detail. Sixteen men under his service sergeant, with a corporal, in all eighteen men, were selected for the duty of seeing Mr. Normand and the rescued lady safely to Omaha after their other friends had left them. Of course the detective Mr. Young, was to remain at his post till his employer reached Chicago.

The Californians each received bountiful pay for their services, and went on with the first stage that passed, satisfied that they had helped to teach their robbers a lesson and also with their recovered gold in their pockets, for they were reimbursed from that found among the robbers for their loss.

When the ambulance and its escort were ready to start next morning, Captain Felton and Lieutenant Ingalls took leave of the rescued lady and Mr. Normand with much feeling.

"We shall never expect to see you again!" said the Black Horse Captain. "But when you are safe in England write to us who are on the plains and let us know you have arrived safely and well after all the dangers you have had to pass! Cody—I shall see often, for he'll stick to the road till some rascally Sioux lifts that long hair he is so careful of."

All was ready now for a start, and the farewell words were spoken.

Cody, full of joy, rode in the lead of the column, but Powell, very gloomy, hung back where he could once in a while look into the ambulance and see two happy faces, one of which he deemed the sweetest he had ever seen. The other he didn't like so well—but, poor boy—he couldn't help himself. "Love will go where it is sent." That is an old adage, but there is truth in it.

From the up Pony Express met that day, Mr. Normand and the detective learned that a trouble they expected below would not come upon them.

That trouble was the transportation down the road of the two murderers, "Crosby" and "Lercher." "Judgment" and "execution" had put them out of the way, and their captors were not sorry. They had met an awful death, but none too easy when their crimes were considered.

It took nearly three days' fair marching to reach Sweetwater. Here Libbie found her foster-father, much to her joy, better than any of them had expected.

A second ambulance, secured at a station above, was sent for, and when the party moved on he was with it. To Cody, who would not leave his route, he left the disposal of his mules and traps, for when Libbie had said she never would go back to England without good old father Jake, he felt too happy for anything else to be thought of.

At his own station Libbie had to part with "Brother Will," as she called him. It was touching, for in their pure way they loved each other deeply. Mr. Normand felt no foolish jealousy—he was satisfied that the heart would come with the hand which was to be his when they arrived in Omaha.

Powell did not leave the cortège. He was going back to school when they met him—he now kept on to fulfill his intention.

CHAPTER LI.

LORD AND LADY.

OUR story draws rapidly to a close. Though it has been full of tragic incident and its heroes and the one heroine, the "one beautiful woman," as my friend Joaquin Miller hath it, saw much of tempest and storm in the early part, it is to end in sunshine.

Nothing of serious import occurred on the long journey down the road to Omaha.

In Omaha, the marriage-bells rung their merry chime, and henceforth the inevitable interviewer had to write of the rescued heiress as—"The lovely Mrs. Neville Normand."

Old Jake Limbertoes was left here under the care of an old army surgeon, who promised to have him ready for a voyage to England within three months.

Mr. Normand, who seemed anxious to return with his bride who grew fairer and seemed happier every day, made short stops by the way.

At Chicago he left with the well satisfied detective, Mr. Duncan Young, enough money to place a neat monument over the grave of the murdered agent, Mr. Wilson.

To "Libbie," as we yet must call her, the journey on was like fairy life. In luxurious railroad cars, and in palace-like hotels she found a contrast to travel and comfort such as she had known, as could scarce be described.

And yet while traveling even in this style, having everywhere the best unbounded means could call for, she did not realize what was to come.

Normand told her of the Grand Ancestral Castle they would occupy, of the vast estate now jointly their own, of the life they would lead in the land she had never seen, and she listened as if he were reading to her some sweet story in which the heart of romance reveled.

Arriving in New York at the old "Astor" then the leading hotel of the Empire City, they waited until "Libbie" was fully rested and had also prepared a wardrobe fitting for her entrance into the society which thenceforth would receive her not as the wild Rosebud of the Plains, but as one of the leading ladies of the land.

The voyage across the ocean was speedy, safe and without incident. Already the papers on both sides of the water had chronicled the Romantic History of the "Rescued Heiress" as an enterprising story-writer had christened her, and her arrival was a grand ovation from the moment she touched England's rock-bound shore.

At the castle triumphal arches had been raised, they trod on flowers as they passed into the grand old hall and troops of happy servants greeted their lovely mistress and their lordly master.

For not a peer in all the realm had more manly dignity than Neville Normand.

After a few days of rest, before giving the grand reception party he intended, Mr. Normand in presence of Mr. Sturtevant the lawyer, and his fair young bride, opened the ebony casket spoken of in the will.

In it was a sealed package directed to the Queen of England—her Royal Highness, Victoria.

She was then in London and thither as soon as he could go, Neville Norman repaired, to present the package with his bride to the notice of his sovereign.

He could not have a private audience, but on a regular reception-day was "presented" in due form by the Lord Chamberlain, who, by the way, was a relative to the Normands of Eaglethorpe.

When her Majesty broke the seal of that package her face wore a look of wonder and a smile of pleasure lighted it up.

"Sir," she said to Neville Normand, "my true and loyal subject, the late Lord Glenarvon, here hath made his last request in life. And we shall not refuse it. It is that his peerage be continued in his only daughter's husband, Neville Normand, whose lineage is more ancient than his own and in whom all his estate is vested. That the said Neville Normand be known as Lord Glenarvon hereafter and it is our will that such be the entered decree. All formalities will be concluded under the great seal of the realm!"

What wonder that the new lord and his fair bride knelt and kissed the extended hand of the best of living queens—one who in all her state had never forgotten the duty of wife and mother.

And now the little girl who has been with us so long—she who has excited our sympathy and won our love by her purity and her heroism, her sufferings and her escapes from so many overshadowing perils, must take her leave of us as—not our little Libbie, the American princess—but Lady Glenarvon, of Glenarvon Castle.

When good old Jake Limbertoes reached the castle, three months later, she was yet "Libbie" to him, though "My Lady" to all else around her.

It would not be fair to end without a brief reference to Salvation Hall and One-Eyed Clare. Eight worn-down men on foot returned there eight days after the fight at Bear Run. They told of the utter defeat of Omaha Charley and his band, and that they had left their leader dying beside his dead captive.

Clare listened with a lowering brow.

"I thought that Omaha Charley was a fit leader of men—not a fool to throw away good lives and lose his own for a woman! He wanted men sent back to bury him and her? Not much! Let the wolves bury them in their ravenous paunches and their bones be the monument of folly. He was in love! Bosh—a road-agent and a robber should love nothing but his trade! I would sooner see Old Nick himself, hoofs, tail and all on, come into Salvation Hall than the prettiest woman that ever smiled danger to man!"

And he dismissed the remnant of Omaha Charley's command very curtly, and told them he would soon send them where they could make up for lost time.

Benjy, the "orfin," went and had a long talk with them about the capture and the chase, and told his story of what occurred after he had left them at their second camp.

Even those hardened men shuddered while they heard him coolly tell how he had fired the prison in which "Crosby" and the tenderfoot lay ironed and helpless—how he alone followed and gave them the "deserter's doom."

"You are a bitter curse!" said one of the listeners.

"Only a poor, handless orfin boy!" he cried, as he lifted up the stumps of his arms and wiped away a pretended tear.

Then he bounded away to find the man who was detailed to feed him, for the gong sounded for supper.

And—we will lay down our pen for the good reason that our story is at

THE END.

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